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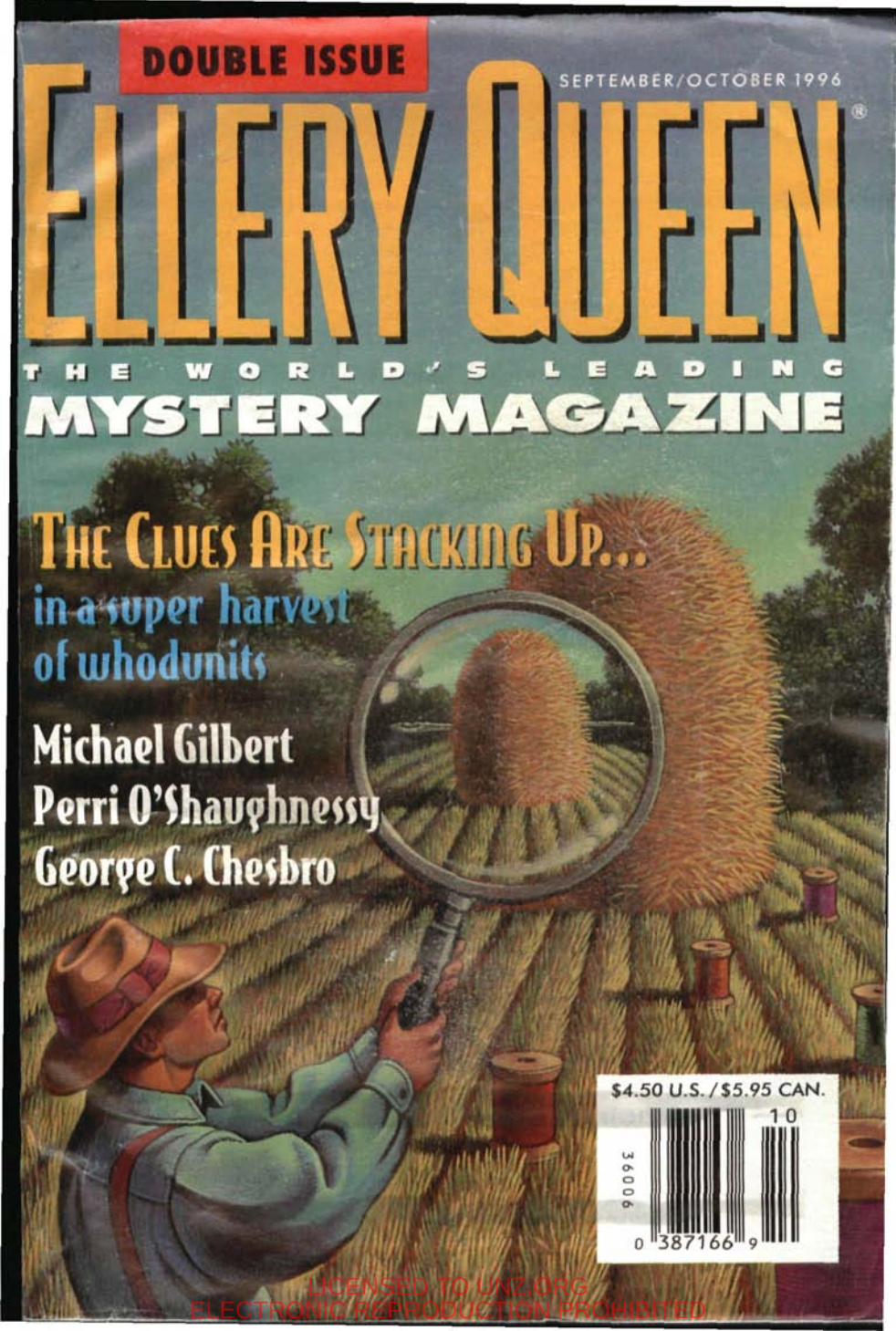

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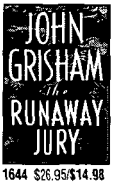

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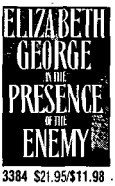

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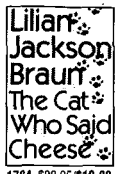

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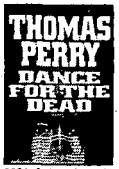

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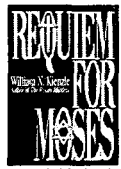

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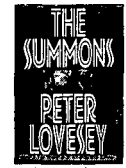

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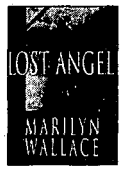

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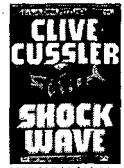

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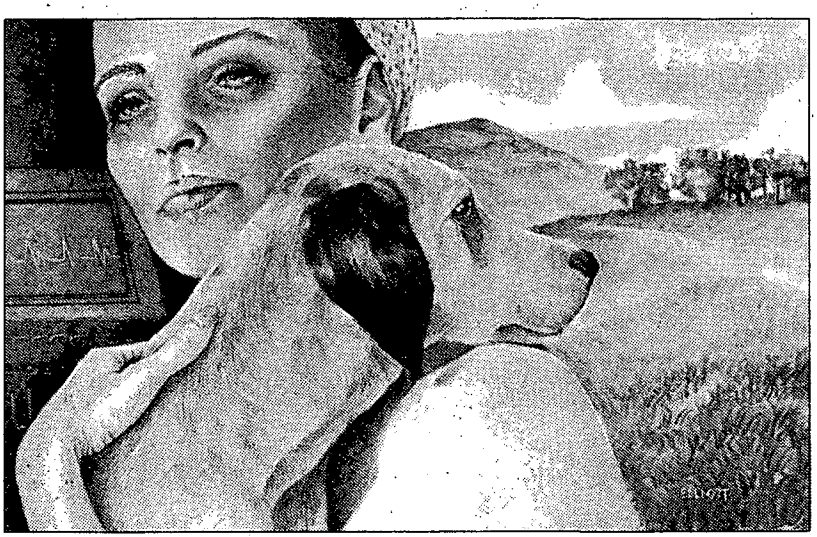

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PUPPYLAND

by Doug Allyn

The bitch had golden eyes, liquid and deep. Her coat was sleek, a lustrous liver color with white ticking on her shoulders and rump. She was a four-year-old German shorthaired pointer, weight, about seventy-five pounds. She looked exhausted. She was lying on her side on a red velvet pillow in an elaborate wicker dog basket. Her name was engraved on an ornate brass plate on the front. Hilda Von Holzweg. Five squirming furballs were sucking at her swollen breasts.

A sixth wasn't squirming anymore. She'd pushed it to the edge of the basket away from the others. David picked up the dead pup. It was already cooling. Hilda raised her head a moment and glowered at him, but didn't growl. Probably didn't have the energy.

"How long was she in labor?" David asked.

"I'm not sure," Ted Crane said. "She had them in the night. I checked her at eleven just before I went to bed. Then this morning,

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about seven, there they were."

"And this pup was alive then?" David said, turning the small body over, examining it for injuries or obvious flaws.

"I believe so. I can't honestly say I took special notice of it, I mean, they all look pretty much alike, except for the solid white one. Is it an albino?" Crane was a bit of an albino himself, a handsome one, tall and fair, with sandy hair and nearly invisible eyebrows. He was dressed for the office in a mocha-brown three-piece power suit. His Sulka tie probably cost more than the loden-green corduroy sport coat David was wearing.

With three first-place wins in the *EQMM* Readers Award competition and a half-dozen Edgar Allan Poe Award nominations and awards for his short stories, Doug Allyn is one of the most celebrated of all mystery short story writers. "Puppyland" is the fourth entry in a series that has appeared only in this magazine. ¶

"I doubt he's a true albino," David said. "His nose is dark. Can't be certain until his eyes are open, though. Solid-white shorthair pups are quite valuable, I understand. Did the dead pup try to suckle at all?"

"I think so. I didn't really pay any special attention to it until I noticed it was just stumbling around, kind of wheezing. And then it died. The other one was wheezing too, but it was all right afterward."

"The other one?"

"Another pup was behaving oddly. My wife has it in her room, feeding it with a bottle."

"And it's taking the bottle?" David frowned.

"Seems to be. But only when she holds it. It stops trying when she puts it down."

"I see. Is she cradling it? Like a baby, I mean?" David demonstrated what he meant by cradling the dead pup in the crook of his arm, with its head upright.

"Something like that," Ted acknowledged, wincing at the casual way David handled the tiny corpse. "But she can't hold it for long. She's . . . quite ill herself. Look, I can't hang around here all day, I have to get back to the office. I have a luncheon meeting at one."

"I'll just be a few more minutes," David said, examining the dead

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pup's face more carefully. There were bubbles of dried milk in its nostrils. He tried to force its mouth open with a fingertip but it was locked shut. Rigor mortis had already set in. "I don't think this is anything serious, Mr. Crane. The mother and the rest of the pups look healthy as horses. I'd guess this fella's problem was a birth defect rather than an illness. I'd better examine the other sickly pup, though, if you don't mind."

"My wife's room is at the head of the stairs," Crane said impatiently. "I really have to go. Will you take care of the dead one?"

"You mean dispose of it?" David said.

"I'd appreciate it," Crane said. "I don't like having to mess with . . . dead things."

"I thought you worked at the hospital," David said.

"I'm Director of Public Relations," Crane said, trying not to sound smug, and failing. "I deal with fund-raising, not patients. Frankly, I try to have as little to do with corpses as possible."

"I'll see to this one," David said. "Do you have a plastic bag?"

"In the kitchen. Thanks for coming by, Dr. Westbrook. I really have to go." Ted Crane hurried off. Grateful for an excuse to be away from the messy business of life and death, David thought.

David left Hilda and her pups in their basket and wandered into the living room. The Crane home was a mansion, really, filled with antiques. The Persian rugs were rich, but showed signs of wear. Tudor furniture was covered in white damask, and an honest-to-God *Gone with the Wind* staircase swept up to the floors above. The stairway had been modified to accommodate a wheelchair lift. David followed the lift rails up to the second floor. The first door was ajar and he rapped lightly.

"Mrs. Crane?" No answer.

"Hello?" He peered cautiously around the door. A woman was propped up in bed, surrounded by pillows, cradling a puppy in her arms. "Hi," David said, "I'm Dr. Westbrook, the veterinarian. Your husband said you were having a spot of trouble with some of the pups. May I come in?"

She nodded, closing her eyes a moment. Her hair was auburn and very fine, like a wispy halo of fire. She was wearing a jade-green embroidered silk bed jacket. It matched her eyes, which were a deep, deep emerald. And very sunken. She was probably in her mid thirties, but illness was ageing her. There was a rack of medical equipment beside her bed, a humidifier, a heart monitor, and a respirator the size of a small microwave. A length of flexible

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tubing connected the respirator to a breathing mask on the pillow beside her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I have some difficulty talking. How's Hilda?"

"She's fine," David said. "So are her pups. How's this little guy doing?"

"Not well. He'll only eat if I hold him."

"May I?" David took the pup from her arms. He stepped over to the window for better light, then worked his finger into the hinge of the pup's jaw, pried it open, and peered in. Damn. There was a narrow schism in the roof of its mouth. Double damn.

"What is it?"

David hesitated.

"Just say it, Doctor. I'm used to hearing bad news."

"He has a birth defect, Mrs. Crane, a cleft palate. I expect the one that died had the same problem. I'm sorry."

"Call me Inga, please. How bad is it?"

"It's usually fatal, I'm afraid. They can't suck very well, you see, so they either starve, or milk gets into their airways. The pup downstairs probably suffocated."

"But this one seems to be feeding all right."

"That's because you were holding him upright. He doesn't have to suckle. The milk's trickling down the back of his throat."

"Well, what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, for now. But he won't be able to eat solid food that way, or even drink water normally. He could choke, or get fluid into his lungs and die of pneumonia."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Well, on an adult dog, I could repair the palate by inserting a plate, perhaps, but the procedure's not practical and the surgery would be both risky and expensive in any case."

"But it would be possible? On an adult dog?"

"Mrs. Crane, Inga, forgive me for being blunt, but pups with this problem rarely reach adulthood."

"Really? Take a look at all the machinery beside my bed, Doctor. Do you know what it's for?"

David glanced at the rack of equipment on the left side of the bed against the wall. "A heart monitor," he said. "And . . . some kind of a respirator?"

"That's right. I have ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. I had an auto accident nearly three years ago, shattered my right shoulder and

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hip. And while I was in the hospital, in traction, they diagnosed the ALS. They gave me eighteen months to live, or less. That was three years ago. I need a wheelchair to get around now, and the respirator breathes for me much of the time, but I'm still here. Maybe that's why life seems very precious to me these days. If I care for this pup properly, will he have a chance to live?"

"That depends. He won't be a pup for long, you know. He'll only drink milk for a few weeks, then he'll need solid food and it'll have to bypass his mouth. Are you up to feeding him through a tube? Several times a day?"

"If that's what it takes to save his life, then I'll either do it myself or see that it's done. I'm not alone here, my mother can help, and my niece. And you? Are you willing to help?"

"I don't know," David said. "What you're suggesting would be difficult for anyone, let alone someone in your condition. No offense, ma'am, but you seem to have troubles enough of your own."

"Trust me, a few puppy-sized troubles will make a pleasant change from the rest," she said, smiling. It was a wan, but fine, smile.

"Then I guess we'll all have to do the best that we can," David said, handing her the pup.

"Good," Inga Crane said. She cradled the pup to her breast. "Can you sit a minute? I don't have much company. You're the newcomer Yvonne LeClair married, aren't you?"

"Not such a newcomer," David said, easing into the chair beside her bed. "I've been practicing in Algoma for about four years."

"In northern Michigan, unless you're born here you're a flatlander forever. Ted, my husband, moved here . . . My God. Is it five years now? It seems like so much longer. We hadn't been married long when . . . this happened." She indicated her wasted form with a wave of her free hand. "He tries, but he's such an active man, he has a little trouble dealing with illness, I think."

"On the other hand, you seem to be handling it well enough," David said.

"But I have no choice, have I?" she countered. "Oh! Is something wrong? The puppy's twitching."

David peered at it intently, then relaxed. "No, nothing to worry about," he said. "He's just dreaming, that's all."

"Dreaming? About what?"

"What do you mean?"

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"Well, he was just born last night. He hasn't been anyplace or done anything yet. His eyes aren't even open," Inga said. "So what can he possibly be dreaming about?"

"I don't know. I guess I never thought of it that way."

"Maybe he's dreaming about Puppyland," she said.

"About what?"

"Puppyland. My family has always had dogs, so my mother never told us the stork story. She said that baby dogs came from Puppyland, kind of a hound heaven, where they can run and play all day. When I was a girl, this house was my Puppyland. My grandparents built it and I grew up here. Ted thinks we should sell it now. I know it's expensive to maintain, but I doubt my mother'd be happy anywhere else, and I love it too. God, I used to run like a deer in the hills out back when I was a kid. I still dream about it sometimes. I'm running flat-out with the wind in my face, and I can breathe easily again. I almost hate to wake up. I hope this little guy won't be too disappointed when his eyes open and he finds out he's not in Puppyland anymore. He's stuck in our world now." She smothered a cough with her hand. She was clearly tiring.

"At least he'll have a friend," David said, rising to leave. "What are you going to call him?"

"I don't think I'll name him yet," she said, thoughtfully tracing his silken ears with her fingertip. "It will be harder to lose him if he has a name. I'll wait a few weeks. See how he does. Thanks for coming by, Dr. Westbrook."

"Call me David," he said. "Would you mind if I stopped by now and again? No charge."

"I'd like that," she said. "Maybe you can help me choose a name. If he . . . needs one."

"He's going to need one," David said.

She named the pup Hector, after the old phrase "since Hector was a pup." Neither of them could remember who the original Hector the pup was, but it didn't matter. Inga's Hector soon developed a quirky personality of his own. Despite his defect, he cheerfully adapted to his circumstances, learning to feed and drink in Inga's arms, first liquids, then solid food through a tube. Over the next several months, as spring warmed into summer, David stopped by once or twice each week to check on the pup and to chat with Inga Crane. The visits often stretched into an hour or more, talking

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about dogs, or mutual friends, or just life in general. David rarely saw Ted on these visits, but he did meet Inga's mother, Clare, a charming, drifty old soul who seemed to wander through the house like a ghost. She'd obviously been a beauty once, but her mind was as cloudy now as Inga's was clear.

Most of the scutwork and heavy lifting involved in caring for an invalid fell to Inga's niece, Cindy, a stolid, pudgy girl of twenty or so. She wore her dun-colored hair in an MTV-style shambles and her ears were pierced with three studs each. She never complained, but David sensed that she resented his visits a little, so he generally took her arrival as his signal to leave.

The truth was, his visits had become more personal than professional anyway. Hector was healthy and growing like the national debt, and David really couldn't afford the time away from his practice, but there are some things you have to do for yourself. For your soul.

In any case, he knew that the visits wouldn't continue for long. He was a vet, not an M.D., but it was clear that even as Hector was flourishing under Inga's devoted care, Inga herself was wasting away, as though the fire of her spirit was consuming her shrunken body. It should have been depressing, but he found her struggle an inspiration instead. He'd read Dylan Thomas in college, but he'd never truly understood the line "Rage, rage, against the dying of the light," until he met Inga. Her thirst to savor every last drop of her life, however bitter, personified the indomitability of the human spirit more than anyone he'd ever known. And in the end, she did not "go gentle into that good night . . ." Not gentle at all.

The phone dragged David up from the depths of a dark dream. He glanced at the nightstand as he fumbled for the receiver. Four-thirty. What the hell?

"Hello."

"Dr. Westbrook? This is Sheriff Wolinski. I'm sorry to bother you this time of the morning, Doc, but I've got a special problem. Are you awake?"

"I am now. What is it, Stan?"

"I'm at the Crane place on Stillmeadow Road. Do you know it?"

Damn. "Yes, I know it," David said. "Is it Inga?"

"Yeah, she's gone all right. Thing is, it looks like her dog may have killed her."

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"What?"

"Look, Doc, I can show you a helluva lot faster than I can explain it over the phone. Can you get out here, please? Now?"

"Right," David said, fully awake now. "I'm on my way."

The emergency flashers of the Algoma County Sheriff's patrol car and the EMT van were already being washed out by the first light of dawn when David pulled into the red brick drive of the Crane estate. Sheriff Stan Wolinski was waiting for him on the porch, pacing impatiently. Stan's concrete-block build and gray uniform were both in perfect order and his eyes were clear. A grayish stubble of beard was his only concession to the early hour. David wondered if he ever actually slept, or just caught catnaps at his desk at the county jail.

"Morning, Doc," Stan said, leading the way into the house toward the winding staircase. "Sorry to drag you out like this, but I've got a bit of a situation here."

"What's happened?"

"Mrs. Crane's mother called nine-one-one about three A.M., said her daughter'd passed away, then started mumbling. When the EMT techs got here they found the mother sitting by the bed. The dog was on the bed, guarding the body. The old lady seemed to be pretty much in a fog."

"She's on quite a bit of medication," David said.

"Anyway, Mrs. Crane was dead, probably had been for an hour or so. The bedclothing was disarranged a little, as though she'd thrashed around some at the end. And as the technician was checking over the body, he noticed the respirator was unplugged."

"The respirator?"

"Right. Apparently she could only breathe without it for short periods. I guess she was in pretty bad shape. Thing is, the machine's quite close to the wall, and there's other equipment near it. The mother said she hadn't touched it, and the tech thought it was unlikely it could have been unplugged by accident. It looked odd to him, so he called me."

"And you called me? What the hell for?"

"I'm coming to that. By the time I got here, the husband had showed up—"

"What do you mean, showed up?"

"Came upstairs. He said he was asleep, but the EMT guys had

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been there half an hour at that point, and hadn't been particularly quiet."

"Maybe Crane's a heavy sleeper."

"Maybe. He said he'd had a few scotches before he turned in and I believe him. He smelled like a brewery. On the other hand, he was wearing street clothes. I ask you, if you had a sick wife and heard noises in the night, would you bother to get dressed? Anyway, when the tech tells Crane the respirator was unplugged, he goes ballistic. He says the dog must have pulled it out, that he'd been prowling around back there before. And there are some marks on the plug that coulda been made by a dog. So I called you."

"To look at a plug?"

"Dave, what I got here is a dead woman who probably would have passed away naturally in a month or two anyway. Maybe a few things don't quite add up about it, but that's not unusual. Death is a messy business sometimes. I've got no real reason to doubt the husband's story, I just want to be sure. If the marks on the plug look like toothmarks to you, we can all go home."

"What the hell is he doing here?" Ted Crane bellowed. He was blocking the head of the stairway in his stocking feet. His shirttail was half out of his dark dress slacks. He was weaving and his face was flushed. "This is his fault!"

"Mr. Crane—" Stan began.

"He knew that damned dog had a birth defect! If he'd done the right thing and put it down before my wife got so attached to it—" Crane lunged at David, swinging wildly at his head. Stan grabbed his arm but the force of Crane's rush carried all three men down in a heap, struggling dangerously at the top of the stairs.

"Damn it, Crane, get hold of yourself!" Stan roared, twisting Ted's arm behind his back and hauling him to his feet.

"Let go of me, you bastard! This is my house!"

"This is a crime scene until I say otherwise!" Stan said, forcing Crane against the wall. "Now you settle down or I'll cuff you and lock you in the back of my patrol car. Are you all right, Doc?"

"I'll live," David said, getting to his feet, more shaken than he cared to admit. He touched his cheek with his fingertips. They came away bloody. Terrific.

"You've got a nick on your cheek."

"It's nothing," David said. "Crane's cufflink grazed me, that's all. Mr. Crane, I'm terribly sorry about your wife, and I know this

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must be an awful time for you. So why don't you let me take care of my business and I'll get out of here."

"You'd better take that dog with you," Crane snarled over his shoulder. "You get it out of here or I'll kill it! I swear I will!"

Stan marched Crane over to a chair and parked him in it, none too gently. David left them in the hall and stepped into Inga's room. A burly, uniformed medical tech was standing just inside the door, his arms folded. Inga's mother was sitting beside the bed in her robe and slippers. One of her hands was beneath the sheet that covered Inga's body and David guessed she was still holding her daughter's hand. He touched the elderly woman's shoulder. She glanced up at him without a hint of recognition, then looked away.

David eased cautiously around the bed, knelt beside the respirator, and picked up the plug. Tooth marks. He'd seen them a thousand times on everything from fine furniture to briar pipes. Puppies test their strength against the world by grabbing and tugging on things. Or they just chew things up for the sheer joyful hell of it. There were several other cords plugged into the multiple socket, for the other medical equipment and her bedside lamp. They'd been chewed as well. He examined the respirator plug closely to be sure, but there was little doubt. Damn it. Sometimes it seemed like the Almighty had an almighty warped sense of humor . . .

He rose slowly, dusting off his hands.

"What do you think?" the medic asked. The tech was a heavyset man with a beer-barrel build and a dark stubble of beard. He looked tired, probably nearing the end of his shift.

"I'd say her husband is right. There are toothmarks on that plug," David said, gazing down at the shrouded body. "How did she . . . die?"

"Heart failure, I think, triggered by anoxia. Actually, in her condition that mask was barely adequate to keep her going anyway. Her doctor wanted to hospitalize her weeks ago to have a ventilator tube inserted. She refused."

"Can't say I blame her for that," David said. "It can be a pretty uncomfortable situation."

"True blue," the medic agreed, "and it's not like it would have cured her. It would only have prolonged her dyin' a bit. Maybe it's best this way. If she woke up at all, she was probably too groggy to realize what had happened."

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"I hope so," David said. "She was quite a lady."

"Well?" Stan Wolinski said from the doorway.

"They . . . certainly look like tooth marks to me," David said. "Proper depth, proper spacing. Maybe a lab could tell you more."

"Do you think a lab's necessary?"

"No," David said. "They're tooth marks all right."

"Anything wrong, Doc? You look a little bummed."

"Just upset," David said. "The lady was a friend of mine."

"In that case, considering Crane just decked you, I'll assume your opinion's as close to objective as I'm likely to get. Thanks for coming down."

"I'll send you a bill," David said. "Where's Hector?"

"Hec—oh, the dog, you mean?"

"We shut it up in the next bedroom," the medical tech volunteered. "He wouldn't let us near her."

"You gonna take him with you, Doc?" Stan asked.

"I think I'd better, under the circumstances, don't you?" David said. "There's been enough trouble here for one night." He collected Hector from the adjoining bedroom. Ted Crane was still in the hallway chair where Stan had left him, sitting with his head in his hands. He didn't look up as David passed.

David put Hector in the back of his Jeep. He clipped a lead to the pup's collar, but it wasn't really necessary. Hector made no move to escape. He seemed dazed and disoriented, barely aware of his surroundings. And David knew exactly how he felt.

During the course of the day, David tried to feed Hector several times. He'd seen Inga do it, cradling the pup lovingly in her arms, slipping the feeding tube into the corner of his mouth to bypass the schism in his palate. Hector had seemed to enjoy every moment of it. Why not? It was the only way he'd ever been fed by the only mother he'd ever known. When David tried it, though, the pup snapped out of his apathy long enough to snarl at him and spit the tube out. An hour later David's second attempt failed as well. He decided to have his assistant, Bettina, try the next one. Perhaps a woman's touch . . .

"Doctor?" Bettina stuck her head around his office doorjamb. "There's a Cindy Meyers to see you. She says it's urgent."

"Meyers? Oh, that would be Inga Crane's niece. I'd better see her now, if no one's bleeding to death on the waiting-room floor."

"Nope, everything out front's routine. I'll send her back."

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David met Cindy at the door. She was wearing a Def Leppard sweatshirt and jeans. Her eyes were red, but she seemed more nervous than sad. She scanned the office warily, as if she were scheduled for some uncomfortable procedure.

"I'm very sorry about your aunt," David said, taking her hand and leading her to the chair beside his desk. "If there's anything I can do . . . "

"Actually, maybe there is," Cindy said, glancing uneasily around the office. "I need to talk to you privately. Would you mind closing the door?"

David hesitated, then complied. "What is it?" he asked.

"Ted called me around ten this morning," she said. "I was visiting a girlfriend over at Central Michigan. He . . . he sounded pretty loaded, you know, drunk?"

"I suppose that's understandable, wouldn't you say?"

"I guess it is," she said, taking a deep breath. "Anyway, I drove straight back, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought I'd better talk to you before I went home."

"I don't understand."

"The thing is, Ted said that Hector killed Aunt Inga. That he'd been chewing on the respirator plug and pulled it out somehow. He said the sheriff even called you out to look at it."

"That's right. There were tooth marks on the plug—"

"How many marks were there?" Cindy interrupted. "I mean, was it all chewed up? Or were there just a few?"

"Well, I didn't actually count the marks but the cord wasn't badly chewed. They were definitely toothmarks, though."

"I know they were," she said. "I've seen them."

"What do you mean you've seen them?"

"Hector's been chewing up things for the past few weeks," Cindy said carefully, her voice tautly controlled. "Slippers, shoes, table legs, anything he can reach, really. And Inga caught him chewing on the cord a couple of days ago. She had me paddle his bottom good."

"He's just a pup," David said. "Sometimes one lesson isn't enough."

"You don't understand. Inga and Ted had a big fight about it. He wanted her to get rid of the dog, said if it happened again, he'd get rid of it whether she agreed or not. So she was real careful to watch Hector when he was with her, and she's been shutting him out of her room at night."

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"What are you saying?" David asked.

"I'm not saying anything," Cindy said. "I'm just trying to . . . understand how Inga died. Ted said it must have happened during the night, right?"

"I believe the EMT people got there about three-thirty," David said.

"And Inga seldom went to sleep before midnight," Cindy said. "So, let's say Clare forgot and left the door open or something and Hector got in. The first thing he would have done was jump on her bed to say hello. He always did."

David started to speak but she waved him off.

"I know," she said. "He's only a pup. So maybe he didn't say hello. Maybe he went straight to that cord and chewed on it until he pulled it out. But he couldn't have done that without drooling on it, could he?"

"No," David said, "I suppose not."

"So? Was the plug damp?"

"No," David said slowly, remembering. "It was dry. A little dusty, in fact. I . . . brushed my hands off after I handled it." Neither of them spoke for a moment, each of them considering what the other had said.

"You don't think the pup unplugged that cord, do you?" David asked at last.

"I don't know what to think," Cindy said. "You've got to understand, I'm in kind of a shaky situation here. Inga took me in when my parents died, but everything will belong to Ted now and he can put me out in a heartbeat if he wants to. I wouldn't mind so much for myself, but who'll take care of Clare? She can't fend for herself and she loves that house. So I don't want to make waves, but I think I'd better take a look at that cord. After all the fuss about it earlier, I'm pretty sure I'll be able to tell if Hector chewed on it again. The thing is, I think I should have a witness, but if I ask the sheriff to go with me and nothing's wrong, Ted might . . . Look, these past weeks you've been the closest friend Inga had. Would you come with me? Please."

"I—of course," David said abruptly. "Let's go."

Cindy entered the house without knocking. "With any luck, we'll be in and outa here before anybody knows it," she said quietly. "I'm probably just making a fuss over nothing anyway."

David followed her quietly up the main staircase. He felt a bit

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like a burglar, but he hoped to avoid trouble with Ted Crane if possible. Clare was still in Inga's room, sitting beside the empty bed where David last saw her, hours before. She might have been there the whole time, except that she'd exchanged her bathrobe for a prim gray housedress and sensible shoes.

"Hello, Dr. Westbrook," she said vaguely. "Inga's not here now."

"It's all right, Gran," Cindy said, swallowing. "Everything will be all right. We'll just be a moment." She moved around the bed, knelt beside the respirator, and examined the plug. Her mouth narrowed to a thin line. She rose slowly.

"I can't be absolutely positive, of course," she said grimly, "but I'd swear the plug doesn't look any different than it did before. Gran, when you . . . found Inga last night, was Hector in the room with her?"

"Hector?" the old woman echoed.

"Just tell us what happened," Cindy said impatiently. "One step at a time. You came into the room, right?"

"Yes, something woke me . . . The phone? Or the doorbell? I can't remember. I thought at first it was morning. The pills I take . . . usually I sleep very soundly. But when I woke up I had a bad feeling about Inga. And so I went to her room. But . . . she wasn't there anymore. She was gone." Clare looked away.

"The room," Cindy prompted. "Tell us about the room."

"It was . . . a little messy," Clare said. "And you know how fussy Inga was about things being neat. So I straightened up a bit. I didn't want . . . strangers to see it like that."

"And Hector?" Cindy asked. "Was he in the room?"

"Hector? No," Clare said. "He was on his blanket in the hall. He came in with me and jumped on the bed but . . . he didn't get all excited the way he usually does. He just . . . licked at Inga's face a little, and then he curled up at the foot of her bed. He didn't move after that until the ambulance men came. He got excited then, tried to keep them away from her, so they put him in the next room."

"So he was out in the hall until you let him in," Cindy said. Her eyes met David's for a moment.

"Yes." Clare nodded. "Hector was outside."

Cindy took a deep breath. "You said you straightened up the room? Why, Gran? Was it messed up?"

"The . . . bedclothes were disarranged," Clare said vaguely. "As though . . . she must have had trouble . . . at the last."

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"And is that all you did? Fix the bedclothes?"

"No, I . . . her book was on the bed," Clare said. "It was open and I knew she wouldn't want people to read it, so I put it away."

"Her book?" David echoed.

"Her diary," Cindy said, moving to the bookcase and picking out a slim volume.

"You shouldn't touch that," Clare said. "Inga will be angry. . . ." Her voice trailed off as she realized what she'd said.

Cindy leafed through the diary, then froze. She passed the book to David. The paragraph at the top of the page was dated and neatly written in a careful hand. But below it was a wobbly scrawl that covered half the page. *Ted unplu* . . . The line sagged away at the end. Unfinished.

There was a rustle from the hallway, and suddenly Ted Crane was standing unsteadily in the doorway, his face flushed, his hair disheveled. "What's going on here?" he mumbled blearily. "What the hell are you doing here, Westbrook?"

David carefully closed the journal. "What I'm doing, Mr. Crane," he said, picking up the bedside phone, "is calling the police."

Crane made it easy. When Stan Wolinski tried to question him about the diary Ted was so outraged he took a swing at the sheriff. A big mistake. Stan took him into custody for attempted assault and hauled him off in the back of his patrol car.

David left Cindy and her grandmother on the porch, arm in arm. The elderly woman didn't seem to comprehend what had happened, and David recalled Cindy's earlier question, "Who'll take care of Clare?" Perhaps the answer was beside her now. He hoped so.

David hadn't liked Ted Crane all that much initially and his recent behavior hadn't helped matters. Still, the thought that Ted might have killed Inga or contributed to her death was hard to stomach. People killed each other in Detroit or New York or L.A., not in Algoma. Folks moved to the north country to live happily ever after. Maybe that had been Ted's problem. Knowing that he and Inga would never have a happily ever after.

David didn't know what to do about Hector. The pup was still rejecting the feeding tube. If he didn't start eating in the next few days, force-feeding him while he was sedated would be the only option left. It was a tough choice. Hector wouldn't be mature enough for a surgical repair of his palate for another twelve to

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fourteen months, minimum. David doubted the pup could survive more than a few weeks of force-feeding, to say nothing of a year. Besides, he'd seen this behavioral syndrome before.

Dogs that are strongly attached to their masters or their mates will sometimes mourn their deaths so keenly that they lose their own will to live. They don't whine or howl or carry on, they simply sink into a numbed apathy and refuse to eat. Exactly as Hector was doing.

David was in a black mood for the rest of the afternoon, curt with his clients and Bettina. His temper didn't improve when his last client at the end of the day turned out to be Stan Wolinski.

"Doc," the sheriff said, following David back to his office, "I think I need another favor, or rather, Ted Crane does."

"I don't owe Crane any favors," David said grimly, waving Stan toward the chair beside his desk. "I don't owe you any either, for that matter. What's happened?"

"Well, for openers, I've caught Mr. Crane in a half-dozen lies," Stan said. "At first he said he was home, asleep, but when I showed him Inga's diary he changed his story. Swore he was with a lady friend whom he preferred not to name. I told him chivalry was a helluva nice idea but it wouldn't do him much good in the state pen. Them hardcase cons ain't big on Mother may I, you know? At which point he caved in and named . . . a prominent local lady. Who happens to be more'n slightly married to a prominent local gentleman."

"Who?" David asked, his curiosity piqued.

"I'm coming to that," Stan said. "I called the lady in question. She told me she barely knew Crane, couldn't even remember his first name."

"So what's your problem? It sounds open and shut to me."

"That's the problem," Stan said. "It is open and shut. Now maybe Ted Crane's not one of my favorite human beings at the moment, but he's an educated man. He's not stupid. So why would he give me an alibi that was so easy to disprove? For that matter, why would he bother to murder his wife? She was dying anyway. All he had to do was wait, and probably not for very long, either."

"Maybe he got tired of waiting."

"Maybe so. But that still leaves me with his alibi. He claims he can prove he and the lady were more than acquaintances. He says he gave her a puppy as a gift. Says it was a pure white one, worth a lot of money. Do you know anything about it?"

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"There was a pure white pup in the litter," David acknowledged. "And he's right about it being worth a lot of money. White German shorthairs are rare. I'd guess it would be worth at least a thousand dollars, probably more."

"So if the lady in question actually has this dog, then she and Crane are probably better friends than she wants to admit."

"I suppose they could be," David said. "Where are you going with this?"

"It's not where I'm going, Doc, it's where you're going. Would you recognize this dog if you saw it?"

"A white shorthair? Probably. But so could you. Why not just go check?"

"Because I've already asked the lady and she said she doesn't know Crane. So if I show up on her doorstep asking to inventory her dogs, she may just infer that I doubt her word."

"So? Since when did you get sensitive about offending a suspect?"

"But the lady isn't a suspect, she's only a witness. And she also happens to be Senator Holcomb's wife."

"Diane Holcomb?" David whistled. "She's Crane's alibi?"

"So he claims. And since I have to run for election in this county, the senator and his wife aren't people I'd care to tick off unless it's absolutely necessary."

"So you want me to tick them off instead?"

"I'm hoping to avoid offending anyone, period. The Holcombs have a kennel attached to their guesthouse. If you drive past you can probably spot the dog from the road. If it's there, then I'll make an official call on Mrs. Holcomb."

"And if it's not?"

"If you don't see it, then it comes down to her word against Crane's, and he's already lied to me. The funny part is, you're the reason I tend to believe him. That nick on your face you got in the scuffle this morning? He grazed you with his cufflink. Most guys don't wear cufflinks except on special occasions."

"Like a hot date with someone else's wife, for instance?" David said, touching the cut gingerly with his fingertips. "All right, I'll take a drive past the Holcombs' kennel, but that's all I'm doing. Don't expect me to stick my neck out for Ted Crane."

"All I'm asking for is a look, okay?"

"Right," David said grimly. "A look."

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Easier said than done. The Holcombs lived in a rambling brown brick ranch house that sprawled along a ridge west of Algoma. There was a four-car garage behind it with guest or servants' quarters above and a kennel attached to its rear wall. The impeccably landscaped grounds were enclosed by a decorative split-rail fence. It was an expensive home, but most of the homes nearby were equally posh, built on ten-acre lots with three-car garages standard and rolling lawns large enough for polo. Which meant it wasn't a neighborhood where a strange car could linger for any length of time without being noticed.

Fortunately, the next home was a Windsor manor set well back from the road. Its long driveway ran parallel to the rear of the Holcombs' guesthouse, which gave it a clear view of the kennels.

David swung the Jeep into the driveway, slowing as he approached the kennels. Beagles. The first three runs held pairs of beagles. The dogs raised their heads to watch him pass, but otherwise ignored him. The last two kennels were a problem. They were larger than the beagles' pens, but one stood open and empty. No way to be sure what lived there, except that it was probably larger than a beagle. The last pen held a white dog. It was the right size to be Crane's pup, but it was sleeping in the afternoon sun with its back to him and David couldn't be sure one way or the other.

He stopped the Jeep abruptly and climbed out. He vaulted the low fence and trotted to the kennels. The beagles came to life, raising the alarm, yawping and yapping as he approached.

The white pup in the last kennel stirred and rose to check him out, but it didn't deign to join in the clamor. Barking was for beagles, and this pup was no hound. He was a German shorthaired pointer, a solid-white male. And he was almost certainly Hector's one-time littermate.

David knelt for a closer look, to be absolutely sure. The pup approached him curiously and sniffed his hand.

"What are you doing here?"

A woman had appeared at the corner of the building. She was strikingly attractive, with fine, aquiline features and honey-blond hair tied back in a lustrous ponytail. Her eyes were hidden behind dark glasses. She was dressed for country life, riding breeches, boots, and a flannel shirt, but there was nothing working class about her. She oozed the confidence that comes with old money and social position. Or perhaps her confidence came from the

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fiery-eyed Doberman that was straining at the short leash she held in her gloved hand. The dog wasn't growling or even baring its fangs, but its gaze was locked on David's throat. All business. Probably a trained attack dog.

David rose slowly. "I guess I could say I was just passing, Mrs. Holcomb, but I'm not much at fibbing, even in a good cause. My name is Dr. David Westbrook. I'm a veterinarian. Sheriff Wolinski asked me to stop by in order to verify some information, an alibi actually."

"This has to do with that . . . Crane person, doesn't it? I've already told the sheriff that I scarcely know him. My husband and I may have met him at some function, we're quite active socially—"

"Mrs. Holcomb, you don't have to convince me of anything," David interrupted. "I'm not a policeman. On the other hand, this is a very unusual pup you have here. Pedigreed and AKC registered, I imagine."

"What business is that of yours?"

"None at all, ma'am. But if you wouldn't mind an observation by your friendly neighborhood veterinarian, this dog will be awfully easy to trace, which means you're likely going to be involved in a murder investigation whether you like it or not. Ted Crane named you as his alibi. He also said he gave you this dog and here it is. Rather an expensive gift from a man you scarcely know, wouldn't you say?"

She started to reply, then bit it off.

"Ma'am, if you really want to get clear of this thing, the smart thing to do is to just tell Stan Wolinski the truth. He may seem like a rube to you, but you can trust his discretion. He doesn't want to cause any problems for you, and he certainly doesn't want trouble with your husband. That's why he asked me to stop by instead of coming himself."

"And what's your part in this?" she asked coldly.

"I don't have one. I'm only here because I can identify the dog."

"But I'm supposed to rely on your discretion too?"

"I can only give you my word for that, but I live in Algoma now, and practice here. I'm not looking to make enemies either."

"No," she said, releasing a long, ragged breath, "I suppose not. All right then, Ted was here last night. My husband is in Lansing for the week. He spends much of his time there, and I . . . Anyway, Ted arrived about midnight, I believe, and left a few hours later. I'm not really sure of the time, we . . . were drinking quite heavily."

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She took a deep breath and squared her shoulders. Her eyes were coldly unreadable behind her smoked glasses. "That's really all I have to say on the matter," she said firmly. "I'd appreciate if you'd pass it along to Sheriff Wolinski for me. I'm leaving for Lansing within the hour to join my husband. We're dining with the governor tonight."

She tugged the Doberman's leash and turned away, but then hesitated. "Please tell Sheriff Wolinski that I am relying on his discretion. And yours. And by God, I'd better be able to. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," David said, eyeing the Doberman. "Definitely."

"I don't like it," Stan Wolinski said. "I should have questioned her myself." They were in Tubby's Restaurant in downtown Algoma, seated at Wolinski's favorite table. The room was paneled in knotty pine, the furniture was dark oak, and the only decorations were trophy mounts of white-tailed bucks. The chandeliers were made of elk antlers. North-country chic.

"You can still question her if you like," David said, sipping his coffee. "Lansing's only an hour and a half away. If you leave now you can probably roust her in the middle of the governor's after-dinner speech."

"Very funny."

"Sorry. The truth is, I'm a little disappointed too. I was hoping Crane was lying."

"Maybe Mrs. Holcomb's lying. Maybe she's covering for him."

"I doubt it," David said. "She didn't strike me as the sacrificial-lamb type. I got the impression that she only bothered to tell me the truth because it was expedient. If it had been more convenient to let Ted hang, she would have."

"Poor Crane. He doesn't seem to have much luck in love, does he?"

"That depends on how you define luck," David said. "I'd say Inga Crane, as ill as she was, was ten times the woman Diane Holcomb is. And a lot better than Ted deserved."

"But as you say, Inga was in rough shape and that can be a terrible drag, emotionally and financially," Stan said. "Personally, I don't think Crane has the backbone to carry the weight. Alibi or not, I still like him for the killing. And he's the one Inga named."

"Yeah, so she did. I've been chewing on that all the way back to town. Why did she name him?"

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"Maybe because he did it," Stan snorted. "Or at the very least, she thought he did."

"You mean she woke up in the night, suffocating, realized her respirator was shut down, and just assumed Ted unplugged it? I doubt that. She couldn't function without the machine for long and she couldn't get out of bed without help. So with her dying breath she managed to scrawl his name? Very dramatic."

"Sometimes death is dramatic."

"But she didn't want to die. At least, not yet. So why did she bother to scrawl his name? Why didn't she just pick up the phone and dial nine-one-one? Her bedside phone worked, I used it to call you today."

Stan stared at him a moment. "Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely."

"Then maybe whoever unplugged the machine did the same to the phone, or at least moved it."

"Or perhaps Inga simply never woke up. The machine stopped breathing and a few moments later, so did she. But either way, she couldn't have written the note blaming Ted."

"Why not?"

"Because her mother said the book was open on the bed. She put it away to protect Inga's privacy. If Ted killed her, he must have either unplugged the phone or moved it out of her reach and then replaced it afterward. But if he did that, he would have seen the diary."

"But the only other person in the house was Inga's mother. Surely you don't think she could have done this thing?"

"If she had, she'd hardly have put the diary away, would she? No, I think the person that killed Inga knew Ted would be visiting his ladylove and knew Clare would be too zonked on medication to hear the machine's alarm or any sounds Inga might make. Inga once told me that Ted was worried about how much her care was costing, that he wanted her to sell the house. With Ted out of the picture and the old lady clearly incompetent, I wonder who will inherit the estate?"

"You mean the niece? But she was out of town, staying with a girlfriend."

"Was she? Did you actually check her story out, Stan?"

"No, I didn't," the sheriff said slowly. "I had no reason to. Until now."

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David was in his kitchen making a cup of midnight cocoa when he heard the crunch of tires on the driveway. He poured a second cup as Stan Wolinski eased quietly in the back door.

"Thanks, Doc," Stan said, gratefully accepting the steaming cup. "Thought you might be waiting up for news. I've arrested Cindy Meyers. She claims it was a mercy killing. Says poor Inga was suffering and she only wanted to put an end to it."

"Maybe that's how it was," David said, waving Stan to a seat at the kitchen table.

"She'll have a tough time making that fly," Stan said. "She arranged an alibi for herself and forged that death note to frame her uncle. I doubt a judge will buy the idea that she did Inga in out of the goodness of her heart. The friend Cindy claimed she stayed with in Alma folded like an accordion when she learned it was a murder case. She admitted Cindy'd told her she was seeing someone secretly and borrowed her car to drive back here."

"A secret lover? Maybe she got that idea from Ted."

"Possibly, although she's certainly sly enough to have thought of it on her own. She stuck to her story about being out of town until I hit her with the phone record."

"Phone record?"

"Sure. The thing is, Cindy knew about Ted's little midnight visits and she wanted to be sure the EMT guys would find Inga's respirator unplugged and Ted gone. So I figured she must have made a call to wake Clare on the way back to her friend's place. I checked the records, and there was a call from a gas station pay phone just outside of Algoma to the Crane home. Cindy even used her credit card."

"Not very clever of her."

"She didn't have any change," Stan said wryly. "And she didn't want to ask the attendant for any. She was afraid he might remember her. And now I've got a question for you, Doc. Something's been bothering me all day. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Maybe I won't," David said. "What is it?"

"This morning at the Crane place when I asked you about the tooth marks on that plug? I got the feeling you had some doubts."

"No, they were tooth marks all right."

"I'm not saying you lied about anything, only that you might have had some doubts."

"It did seem awfully . . . convenient," David conceded. "There

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were several cords back there and Hector'd chewed on all of them. It seemed odd that the only one he unplugged was the one that really mattered."

"But you didn't say anything."

"No. It was early in the morning and I hadn't had time to think. It occurred to me that Crane might have pulled the plug, but if so, I wasn't sure I should point the finger at him."

"Why not?"

"Because Inga was my friend and she was in a lot of pain," David said evenly. "It cost her every time she drew a breath. To be honest, I'd thought about pulling that plug myself more than once."

"I see. But later, when Cindy asked for your help in implicating Ted, you went along."

"I'd thought things through by then," David said with a shrug. "And I realized that if Inga wanted to end things, she could have done so anytime just by leaving her mask off. But she didn't. I think she intended to live long enough to see Hector healthy and strong and able to stand on his own. Maybe it was a foolish idea, but no one had the right to take it from her, not her friends, nor her family. Only Inga."

"That's straight enough," Stan said, rising. "But next time, if you have any doubts, you tell me about 'em, okay?"

"I hope to God there won't be a next time," David said. "At least not like this one."

"It came down pretty hard, I'll admit," Stan said, pausing in the doorway. "But at least one good thing came out of it. Your friend was in a lot of pain, and now it's over."

David nodded without answering. But he knew it wasn't true. It wasn't over. Not yet.

Four days after Inga's funeral, Hector died. At the end, David eased his passing with an injection. The pup wouldn't accept food from anyone but Inga and he was wasting away. David decided against trying to anesthetize Hector in order to force-feed him. It would only have prolonged the inevitable, and he couldn't find it in his heart to compel Hector to abide in this world when he so clearly wanted to be gone.

Later that afternoon, David placed the pup's small body in the Crawford furnace behind his office and cremated it. His ashes barely filled an envelope.

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Dusk was falling and a hint of rain was in the air as David drove his Jeep through the gates of Holy Cross Cemetery. He parked near the entrance, then followed the tiled walkway to Inga's grave. Her resting place seemed more final somehow than it had the day of her funeral. The flowers were gone now and fresh strips of green sod had been neatly laid down over the mound of raw earth.

He knelt in the grass beside her grave for a moment. He didn't pray. He'd never been a religious man and it would have seemed hypocritical. After a few moments, he glanced around to be sure he wasn't being observed. No one was near. The cemetery stretched away to the foothills beyond. The only other mourner in view was an elderly woman in a dark raincoat and she was far off and lost in her own thoughts.

David carefully raised the corner of a sod strip and slid the small envelope of ashes into the soil beneath, then gently patted the grass back into place. He wasn't sure if what he was doing made any sense, even to himself. But he hoped that it might mean something to Inga.

He lingered as the shadows lengthened, waiting in silence for . . . something. Anything, really. A sign, perhaps. Some indication that he'd done the right thing. But nothing happened, nothing changed. He'd thought that burying Hector's ashes here might give him a sense of closure. It didn't. It felt like an empty, futile gesture. Maybe the cynics are right. Maybe the grave is truly the end of things after all. Eventually he tired of waiting, and rose on stiffened knees. But he hesitated. Something in the distance caught his eye. A movement. Probably just the wind in the trees. The Algoma hills rolled away into the dusky distance like shadowy waves, bathed in the blaze of the lowering sun. And in the dying light, the hills seemed to glow from within, as though they were being magically transmuted into gold, like the hills of Oz or . . .

Puppyland. That's what Inga'd said those hills meant to her when she was a child. And perhaps that was why he felt no sense of her presence at the grave. She wasn't here anymore. If she was anywhere, she would be there, in those shining hills, running free. Breathing free. But not alone. Hector had been so eager to follow her, surely he must be with her now. Perhaps he'd gone to show her the way back to the place he'd come from. Puppyland. Where the air is sweet, and the hills are so lush and lovely that puppies are born dreaming of them. ●

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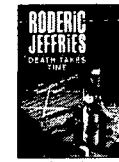

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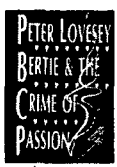

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By the Pricking Of My Thumbs

by Michael Gilbert

A London solicitor whose crime fiction was inspired by the work of the British barrister-crime writer Cyril Hare, Michael Gilbert has been entertaining American readers since the 1950s when his short stories first began appearing in *EQMM*. Unlike most other successful novelists, Mr. Gilbert has developed several sets of series characters for use only in his short fiction. ¶

Stan Meldrum, night duty sergeant at Compton Green Police Station, was not an inspired performer, but he knew the ropes. After replacing the receiver he sat for a full ten seconds. Eleven o'clock. He was balancing the possibilities that Detective Inspector Rayburn was at home in bed, or playing bridge at his club. He thought that bridge was more likely; a correct guess.

"I assume," said Rayburn, "that you told him to touch nothing." But for the disparity in their ranks, Meldrum would have said, "Of course I did," but reduced it to "Yes."

"And told him to lock the front door. Not to go into the front hall, but wait for us in the garden."

"I don't think he was at all keen to go into the hall," said Meldrum. "He telephoned us from a box in the road. I gave the address to the hospital so they could get Dr. Mornington round there."

"Right. And get hold of Hart."

"I done that, sir. She wasn't too pleased. She'd only just got home. Been out all evening looking for bicycles." As Rayburn

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understood, it was not bicycles that Detective Sergeant Alice Hart had been looking for, but the gang of youths who'd been stealing them. A long, tiring, house-to-house enquiry. Well, that was how detective sergeants earned their keep.

He said, "Who does our photography now?"

"Boone, sir."

"Is he any good?"

"He passed the course at Hendon."

"Pity," said Rayburn. He didn't mean that it was a pity that Detective Constable Boone had passed the Hendon course, which was a very good one. He meant that it was a pity that Sergeant Owtram, who had been taking their photographs for six years, should have been promoted to a desk job at Central. He disliked changes.

When Rayburn reached the police station the runabout was ready in the forecourt. Sergeant Hart was standing beside it talking to Detective Constable Boone, who had his photographic equipment ready, stacked in the back.

"Come with me, Sergeant, and you can tell me all you know about this Lavender Box—and Mr. Goldsworthy."

"It's a high-class retirement home, sir. Never more than three or four residents, all good class and with money, I guess, or they wouldn't be able to afford the prices. There's a housekeeper—doesn't live in—and a girl. They do the cooking and cleaning. And, of course, the matron, Nurse Minter. She was there if the residents needed help—they're all well up in their eighties—but her main job was looking after Mrs. Goldsworthy."

"Who is, I gather, a cripple."

"Yes, sir. It's that osteo-something or other. It destroys the bone tissues. She can't get out of bed without help. It's tragic, really, because she's still mentally alert. —I see the doctor's just beaten us to it."

Five men and one woman stood for a moment on the stone-flagged front path, a compact group summoned by death to this very ordinary-looking house. Leonard Goldsworthy's face, in contrast to his black beard, was the colour of parchment. Partly the effect of shock, thought Rayburn, but the overhead street lighting didn't help. Dr. Mornington, the county pathologist, was tubby and self-possessed. The inspector placed himself smoothly in charge.

He said, "Is there a back way in? A door at the other end of the

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hall? Splendid." They trooped round to the rear of the house. Goldsworthy unlocked the back door, stepped inside, and switched on the light. The hall ran through from back door to front door. They could now see what lay on the matting-covered floor of the front hall.

Boone, less hardened than the others, found his eyes drawn unwillingly to the shattered head of Nurse Minter and the blood and brains spilled round it. Sergeant Hart, being a woman, had time to spare for the clothing on the crumpled body. The neat blouse and skirt of a middle-aged, middle-class housekeeper and the blue overall, with its white collar and cuffs, which announced that she was also a nurse.

The inspector was thinking neither of the body nor the clothing. He was thinking of the many things he had to do and the order in which they had to be done.

He said to Boone, "Photography first. Then a measured plan. It's particularly important to note exactly—to the nearest inch—how far the body is from the front door and the foot of the stairs. And Doctor, when you've done what you have to here—"

"Very little."

"So I should suppose. Then you'll want to remove the body to the mortuary for a proper inspection. Perhaps we could use Mr. Goldsworthy's telephone—"

"No need," said the doctor. "I arranged for an ambulance before I came. And might I make a suggestion. As soon as we've lifted the body—we'll work as far as possible from this end—cover the whole floor."

"Right," said Rayburn. He was prepared to accept suggestions from the doctor, who had seen many more corpses than he had. "Sergeant, blankets and mats over the whole area. Then—I'll need a statement from you, sir—" Mr. Goldsworthy nodded. He had not opened his mouth since the police arrived. "We'll go into Nurse Minter's room while you are getting on with things out here." To Alice, "Go up and have a word with Mrs. Goldsworthy. You can tell her that Nurse Minter has had an accident. She won't be able to tell us much, but she may have heard things." And to Boone, "When you've finished the photography, you can tackle the residents."

Since they arrived they had been conscious of the sounds of a television programme coming from the room on the other side of the hall. "The window of that room overlooks the front garden.

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They may easily have seen something. Now Mr. Goldsworthy, if you'll step this way—"

He had a great many questions to ask him. Not only a full account of what he had been doing that evening, up to the moment he had opened his front door and seen the body of Nurse Minter, but questions about the home, its residents, and its routine. But one thing he had to bear in mind: It was now nearly midnight and the Court of Criminal Appeal had recently criticised policemen who subjected witnesses to interrogations lasting into the small hours.

He decided to compromise. He elicited the important points. That Mr. Goldsworthy had departed after supper for the local cinema, getting there at half-past eight. The film ("Italian—interesting if you like that sort of thing.") had finished at about a quarter to eleven. The walk home had taken a little over ten minutes. So it must have been around eleven o'clock when he opened the front door and saw what was lying there.

"A great shock," suggested the inspector.

It had been a shock, and he was only beginning to recover from it. And it was he who raised the point that had been in the inspector's mind. He said, "I do realise that there are other things you will have to ask me. Might I suggest that we continue tomorrow afternoon? Tomorrow morning there will be a score of urgent matters I shall have to attend to. I shall have to ask the hospital to lend me a nurse. A temporary replacement for Minter. My wife needs regular attention, to say nothing of the residents—all well over eighty. And no doubt I shall have to placate Ms. Burches and stop her from deserting us."

The inspector said, "Very well. Two o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

He was not displeased. By that time he would have a number of reports from the doctor and his subordinates which would sharpen his interrogation.

Alice had learned nothing useful from Mrs. Goldsworthy, drowsing among her pillows. Boone had been more fortunate. As he approached the door he heard the rat-tat-tat of a six-shooter.

Evidently the sheriff had got his man. When he got into the room he realized that little information about the happenings of the evening was to be expected. The three ladies were seated in a circle in front of the television set. For them the real world was not in the house or the garden. It was in the little box. Credits

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were now following each other down the small screen. The play was over. Time for a return to reality.

Boone switched on the light and applied himself, without much hope, to his task.

When they understood that he was a policeman, and what had brought him there, they seemed more excited than alarmed. Young policemen often featured in their screen existence. They were nearly always good. As this man seemed to be. There was nothing alarming in his questions.

He started by writing down their names and was given a thumbnail sketch of their families and their histories. Gertrude Tabard, daughter of an Anglo-Indian colonel. Beatrice Mountfield, relict of Dr. Mountfield, the celebrated neurosurgeon. Florence Marant. Her father had been an inventor. She was beginning to draw a picture of the Marant patent rabbit hutch when Gertrude decided that she had occupied the limelight long enough.

She said, "He doesn't want to know about rabbit hutches, Florence. He wants to find out who attacked Nurse Minter. That's right, isn't it, young man?"

"Indeed it is, ma'am. And if any of you happened to hear anything during the past two hours—"

Three heads were shaken, decisively.

Decisively, thought Boone, but not regretfully. They were none of them showing any signs of sorrow at the departure of Nurse Minter. Interest, yes. Even a sort of pleasure. He supposed that to people in their eighties the death of a much younger woman was a symbol of their own survival. A sort of triumph.

After he left them, the three old ladies sat in silence for a time. Then Beatrice said, "Do you think he knows, Gertie?"

"If he doesn't know," said Florence, "do you think we ought to say something?"

"Wouldn't that be sneaking?" said Gertrude.

The word took them back to their school days. Sneaking was something only lower-class and despicable girls did.

"They've no real proof," said Florence. "But we've all heard him, lots of times, creeping along to her room. And if she wasn't doing what we think she was doing, what was she doing?"

"She wasn't cutting his toenails," said Gertrude.

This made them all cackle. Nurse Minter had cut their toenails for them once a month.

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"I think," said Gertrude, "that if he doesn't know, it would be in the interests of justice to drop him a hint."

The interests of justice. That was what their favourite television character, young Mack, stood for. Mack would have found a way out of their difficulty. He was a great hand at solving difficulties.

Boone, who was not as simple as he looked, had quickly circled the house and come in through the kitchen door. The wall between kitchen and television room was not soundproof. He listened with great interest to what the old ladies had to say.

On the following morning all four members of the investigating team had been busy.

Dr. Mornington had submitted a preliminary report. He said that Nurse Minter's skull had been crushed by one powerful blow delivered from behind and above. This suggested that the killer was taller than his victim, or that she might have been stooping forward when she was hit. He added that the fact that the body had been lying in the same place since death, and that he had been called in so promptly, allowed him to be more certain about the time of death than was usual in such cases. He put it at a few minutes one side or another of nine o'clock.

The second report, which had been typed out the night before, was on the inspector's desk when he came in. In it Boone had recorded—as nearly verbatim as he could manage—the conversation that he had overheard. Interesting, thought Rayburn. Too spotty to come to a firm conclusion, but the needle of suspicion was already swinging in one direction.

He himself had a date with the local bank manager. He was only too well aware of the tiresome restrictions which gagged such men, but this particular manager was an old friend and prepared, within limits, to be indiscreet. Rayburn eased himself towards what he wanted to know by pointing out that a search would have to be made for Minter's Will. "By the way," he went on, "I'm not of course asking for any figures, but perhaps you could at least tell me this. Was she a woman of any substance?"

The bank manager had nodded. "An active account," he said, "and recently very well in credit."

That was satisfactory, as far as it went. If details were required later, an Order of the Court would produce them.

But by far the most promising results of that morning's work had been produced by Sergeant Hart. She had found the manager of the Palace Cinema in an expansive mood.

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"Most local cinemas," he said, "have been killed by television. We're lucky to be alive and kicking. We've got a very faithful audience and one thing we do to keep their interest alive is to insert a surprise item every now and then. A short general-interest film, or a cartoon. Not Disney, he's much too expensive, but there are quite good cartoons being made in England and Germany."

"Do you show it at the beginning or the end?"

"We start with advertisements and a trailer, or trailers, of forthcoming attractions. Then we slip in a slide which says, 'And now, for your additional entertainment: Pom-de-pom. Pompetty pom.' "

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't you recognise it? Their signature tune. We've managed to get ahold of two or three of their earliest ones."

Pom-de-pom. Pompetty pom. Of course. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy. It took her back to her own youth.

"And you put that in after the trailers and before the main item. I wonder if you could give me some timings—"

"For last night?" The manager cocked a shrewd eye at her. "Yes. Well. We were a little late in starting. It was just past twenty to nine before the lights went down. There were some advertisements and we showed two trailers that night. Twenty-five minutes for the comedy. I'd say it was almost exactly nine-thirty when the main feature started. My box-office girl, Stella, could confirm the times. She keeps a sharp eye on the clock. She has to stay to the end. And she's keen to get home. Would you care to have a word with her?"

"Very much," said Alice. And, gently prodded, Stella had produced a promising budget of information. She recognised Mr. Goldsworthy. A tall man with a beard. He had arrived in good time. And had his favourite seat. Not that it was anyone else's favourite. On the left-hand end of the back row.

She led the way into the auditorium and indicated the seat. Certainly not a good one. Partly blocked by that pillar. Why would anyone want that one?

Stella looked embarrassed. She said, "Well, I did think—" She indicated the curtained opening alongside the seat. "Elderly men do get—you know—"

Looking through the curtain Hart saw the sign Toilets, and spared Stella further embarrassment by saying, "Yes, I'm sure you're right. That explains it."

There was a door at the far end with a shaded light over it.

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"Emergency exit," said Stella. "Has to be kept open during the performance."

What a setup, said Alice to herself and, later, to the inspector, who said, "It's beginning to add up, isn't it?"

He was aware that anything culled by Boone from Mrs. Burches had to be treated with caution since the housekeeper disliked the nurse, but it filled out the picture that was emerging.

"Set your teeth on edge, it would, the way she treated those three old dears," Mrs. Burches had said. "All good family. Twice as good as hers. Maybe that was why she tried to take it out on them—in small ways. However, give her credit—she looked after Mrs. G all right. Maybe she was hoping for a handout of all the money Mrs. G kept under her bed."

"Do you mean she really—"

"Not really. No. Just a story. The way people talk. However, as I said, she did that part of her job very regular. Brought her all her meals. Tidied her room. Gave her her sleeping draught each night. She must have been on her way to do that when she was attacked."

"How do you make that out?" said Boone, trying not to sound too eager. This might be important.

"How do I know?" said Mrs. Burches, scornful of the ignorance of young men. "I know because she'd put on her overall. Only do that when she was going on duty, wouldn't she?"

Later that evening Rayburn summed up for his team. Hart and Boone had both been in attendance when Mr. Goldsworthy was interrogated. They had written down his answers. When he was questioned about his visit to the cinema, he seemed to know nothing about the "surprise item." The inspector's questions relating to timing were specific, as were Mr. Goldsworthy's answers.

The start, he thought, had been somewhat later than 8:40. There had been the trailers and the tiresome advertising items. He reckoned that it must have been well after nine before the main item got going. The inspector took him through it twice. Boone, who added shorthand to his other accomplishments, made a verbatim note of what Mr. Goldsworthy said.

"If he was in the cinema at nine o'clock," the inspector said, "he couldn't possibly have overlooked the Laurel and Hardy film. So where was he? Easy enough, in the particular seat he was occupying, to slip out and make his way back to the house; knowing Nurse Minter's routine, he plans to get there just before nine

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o'clock. Listens until he hears her come out of her room, unlocks the front door, and steps in. Nurse is surprised to see him. He says, 'Who's been spilling things on the carpet?' Nurse stoops down to see what his left hand is pointing at. Round comes his right hand with a weapon in it. An iron bar, perhaps—"

Boone wrote down, "Weapon??"

"Back to the cinema. Home by eleven. Sees what's in the hall. Telephones the police station."

His assistants nodded. It seemed to fit.

"And the motive. That's clear too. He'd had sex with Minter, more than once. The old ladies heard what was going on. The only other person in the house at night was Mrs. G, who'd been given a sleeping draught. A pretty powerful one, we may guess, because if she *had* heard anything, even suspected it, there'd have been the devil to pay. Her body may have been weak, but there was nothing wrong with her mind. Divorce the least of it. Her Will remade. The money that helped to keep the household going cut off. Minter knows this. Starts to put on pressure. Successfully. Her account starts to look very healthy. When we get an order opening bank records, the position will be clear. Regular withdrawals of cash from his account, regular payments into hers."

Alice said, "Do you think we've got enough to charge him?"

"I do. And in the old days I would have done so. Now I need the backing of the Crown Prosecution Service."

"Surely you'll get it, sir," said Boone.

That was on Wednesday.

Every Thursday the three residents went out for a jaunt. This was a popular move. It enabled Mr. Goldsworthy to spend a few undisturbed hours in the office of his almost-bankrupt insurance agency, and it gave the nurse an afternoon off. Each week they hired the same car, with a driver who knew their habits. Compton Green being on the outer edge of the metropolitan sprawl, it took only a short time to get out into the countryside. The village they were making for boasted an old-fashioned tea parlour. Their table, kept for them, was tucked away at the back of it. Gertrude presided over the teapot. When they were all served she said, in the manner of a chairman opening the business of the meeting, "I should have thought they'd have worked it out by now, wouldn't you?"

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Beatrice said, "Nowadays you can't trust anyone to take any sort of independent action."

"Red tape," said Florence. "Always consult someone else before you do anything. Young Mack wouldn't have stood for it."

"Nor would my father," said Gertrude. "The Colonel never asked anyone's advice over anything important. If something had to be done he did it."

Two heads nodded approval of this masculine firmness.

"I must say," said Beatrice, "that I find our new nurse an improvement. Don't you, Gertie?"

"A distinct improvement," said Gertrude. "She calls me madam." She waved to the waitress, who hurried across. She had a great respect for the old ladies. "Could you bring us another jug of hot water?" And to Florence, "I don't think you should eat another of those cakes, Florrie. They'll bring you out in spots."

"I'd rather have cakes and spots than no cakes and no spots," said Florence defiantly.

Mr. Arbuthnot of the Crown Prosecution Service said, "I'm sorry, but no."

Too often recently he had suffered humiliation at the hands of defending counsel.

"Your case is ingenious, but it's got two gaping holes in it. Look at the map. There are eight built-up streets, all well lit, between the cinema and the home. By your account, Goldsworthy went through all of them before nine o'clock. How could he hope to do so without being seen? A tall man, with a beard. Produce me one reliable witness who saw him coming or going and you close that gap. Less serious perhaps, but the defense will latch onto it, what about the weapon? Did he make a detour out into the countryside and throw it into a ditch? Double the chance of being seen. Or drop it quietly into a drain on the way back to the cinema. More likely. Have you searched all the drains?"

The unhappy inspector had to admit that he had not searched all of them. Not yet.

Although it would have been out of his place to say so, Mr. Arbuthnot nearly added, "Get on with it. Do some work."

It was Mrs. Burches's daughter, who was walking out with Ernie, one of the police constables, who gave them all the latest news.

"Been at it a week," she said. "And they aren't half making them-

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selves unpopular. First it was questions about bicycles. Now it's murderers. Life's not worth living, people say."

Many of the uniformed branch thought the same. Ten of them had been dragooned into doing work which, they thought, belonged to the detective branch. Rayburn encouraged them as much as he could, but before the end of the week he began to wonder whether his own small contingent was pulling its weight.

He said to Alice, "Boone seems to spend most of his time out in the country. What's he up to?"

"He's got an idea."

"What idea?"

"I think he'd better tell you himself."

Summoned into the presence, Detective Constable Boone launched out into waters which were full of shoals and rocks.

Taking a deep breath, he said, "It did occur to me to wonder, sir. I mean, the legal boys seem to think that the main drawback to your—to our—theory was that no one had seen Goldsworthy between the cinema and his house. Although they were all on edge about the bicycle thieves, and keeping their eyes open for strangers."

"So?"

"What I thought was, suppose the killer was another man altogether—living out in the countryside somewhere. He hears the rumour about Mrs. Goldsworthy's money. He could reach the back of the house without going through any main streets. He breaks in. Runs into the nurse, hits her harder than he means, sees he's killed her, and bolts. The weapon could be miles away, in a ditch—"

"So what was Goldsworthy doing when he was meant to be in the cinema—but quite clearly wasn't."

"I think he was paying a visit to the massage parlour—so called—two streets away. A girl who worked there says he was a regular client."

"And saw him there on the night of the killing?"

Boone looked unhappy.

"No, sir. She'd been sacked a fortnight before. That's why she was willing to talk."

"Then you've no evidence at all that he was there that night."

"No, sir."

"I see. Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't think out any wild and wonderful solutions you like, but when I give orders, I like to have them carried out. I've read the reports from the uni-

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formed branch. They don't seem to cover the ground. For instance, there are two long back streets—just the sort of quiet way he'd have preferred—they don't seem to have been covered at all. So get on with it."

Mrs. Rayburn, when she was told about it that evening, said, "That young man's got a swollen head."

When Boone went to Sergeant Hart for sympathy she said, "What we were taught as recruits was, consider the physical evidence. Right. And that's what I'm going to do. For a start, where are the photographs you took?"

Boone had taken thirty beautiful photographs, showing not only the body but all the surrounding features from different angles. Three prints had been made of each, one for the inspector, one for the Crown prosecutors, one for the files. So far as he knew, no one had looked at them since.

Sergeant Hart took the file copies home, consumed her simple supper, and started to study them. Some of them had been taken after the body had been moved. One seemed to interest her particularly. A slight disturbance of the matting and the surrounding blood and plasma defined precisely the place where the body had fallen. And surely, there—faintly—?

There was an angle-poise lamp with a daylight bulb that she used when she was doing her tapestry. She turned it on and shone it down on the photograph. Yes. There it was. Someone had drawn a cross, in brown chalk, on the matting. Just visible to the naked eye, clearly visible to the eye of the camera.

She didn't sleep much that night. The possible implications of what she had seen were building up. She visualised the front hall and the staircase that went straight up from it for two flights. On the first storey the bedroom of the Goldsworthys and the nurse. On the second the bed-sitting rooms of the residents. Before sleep finally overtook her she had made up her mind. The day now dawning was a Thursday. In the afternoon the house would be empty, with the possible exception of the Burches, mother and daughter. Boone should keep them out of the way. They would be happy talking to him over a cup of tea.

"Certainly I'll do it, if it will help," said Boone. "But couldn't you explain what you're up to?"

"One demonstration," said Alice, "is worth half a dozen explanations. Or so we were told."

For all her certainty, when the moment came she found her

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hand shaking. The idea was so strange, so shocking, so horrible, that it must be incorrect. A tower of surmise built on a single chalk mark.

Standing in the hall she could hear the murmur of voices from the kitchen, interrupted by occasional screams and giggles from young Miss Burches, which indicated that Boone was doing his stuff. Apart from that the house was totally silent.

She climbed the stairs, up to the top, and looked into the three bedrooms that faced her. In each of them, as she went in, she encountered the same faint and elusive smell. Potpourri, lavender, or just old age?

She searched each room in turn, cautious as any burglar, careful to put back everything exactly where she found it.

Beatrice was the artist. She had a handsome box of watercolour paints, a jar of brushes, a pile of canvases, an easel. And a cardboard box of chalks, all colours. Yes. Including brown.

The only item of interest in Florence's room was a length of cord, neatly coiled and tucked away in one of her tidily arranged drawers.

In Gertrude's room there was a collection of Benares brass, a relic, no doubt, of her father's service in India. It was ranged on two shelves: candlesticks, boxes, vases, and pots. Lovingly cleaned and polished, it winked back at her as she selected one very small pot and one very large and heavy one.

Returning to the landing, she stood for a moment looking directly down. The matting that had originally covered the hall floor had been taken up in pieces and sent to the forensic laboratory for examination. The tiles, which it was now Mrs. Burches's job to polish, gleamed in the afternoon sun.

Unrolling the cord, she fastened the small pot to it and lowered it until it tinkled against the tiles. Then she tied the end to the banister and walked down. She had the photograph with her. There was no doubt about it. The little pot was resting exactly where the cross had been chalked on the matting.

Upstairs once more, she pulled up the small pot, untied it, and put it and the cord back where they had come from. Then she went down again, poked her head into the kitchen, and said, "Sorry to interrupt, but I've got a little job for this young man. Won't be a moment."

When they had left the room, Mrs. Burches said that it didn't seem right to her, a man being ordered about by a girl. Her

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daughter said she could see nothing wrong in it. Girls did all sorts of jobs nowadays.

Back in the hall, Alice pointed to a cross which she had just made with a piece of brown chalk from Beatrice's box. She said, "Have another look at this photograph. Isn't that exactly where the cross is on the matting?"

"Pretty well," said Boone.

"Then get a pillow—better, a bolster—from Nurse's room and put it over the mark."

When he had done this Alice, who had returned upstairs, called down to him, "Stand back, well back." As she spoke, the heavy brass pot fell, with a heart-stopping thud, into the middle of the bolster.

"And that," said Alice, "is the answer to both the objections raised by the Crown Prosecutors. No one saw anyone approaching the house, at the front or the back, for the simple reason that no one did approach it. And here's your weapon so carefully cleaned that I'm afraid our forensic experts won't find a speck of blood left on it."

Boone looked at her with mingled admiration and sympathy. He said, "Are you really going to try this on the inspector? He'll throw something at you, or burst a blood vessel."

The inspector did neither. He heard her out, made some non-committal comment, and refrained from laughing until he got home that evening. Then he gave full vent to his feelings.

"Just imagine," he said, "instituting proceedings against those three old dears. It wouldn't be laughed out of court, because it wouldn't even get into court."

"I don't think it's a laughing matter at all," said his wife. "Can't you see that that girl is simply trying to queer your pitch? I remember you told me that there was some arrangement in the division for cross-posting. The sooner that young lady's posted away the better."

"Well," said Gertrude, as she filled the three teacups, "it was half a success. We got rid of Nurse Minter, but not, as we had every reason to anticipate, of Mr. Goldsworthy as well."

"If the inspector had had any gumption," said Beatrice, "he'd have charged him. Particularly when we presented him with the motive."

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They had all heard Boone coming into the kitchen and had raised their voices slightly for his benefit.

"Young Mack would have done it," said Florence. "However, one blessing. From what her young man told Annie Burches, it seems that Detective Sergeant Smarty-pants Hart has been sacked."

"Sacked?"

"Well, not exactly sacked. Shoved to another division. To concentrate on cases of child abuse."

The three old ladies cackled at the thought. They none of them had any use for children.

"All the same," said Gertrude, "I don't like leaving a job half done. We shall have to move carefully, but in a month or two, when the dust has settled, I wondered whether we might try something with—poison."

"Arsenic? Belladonna?"

"Atropine? Nicotine?"

"Strychnine," said Gertrude decisively. "Naturally we can't buy it ourselves, but if we complained of infestation by rats in the kitchen, Mr. Goldsworthy would have to buy it himself."

"*And* sign the poison book," said Florence.

"We could get hold of a dead rat," said Beatrice. "From my great-nephew. The one who's a farmer."

"Excellent," said Beatrice.

The thought of a dead rat seemed to entrance the three witches.

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble. ●

" 'YOU WILL MEET A HANDSOME STRANGLER.'
I guess she thought it was a typo."

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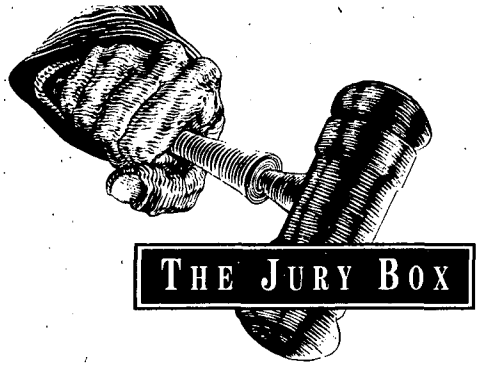

by Jon L. Breen

Is the author a good authority on which of his or her novels are best or worst? Most, of course, never venture a public opinion on the subject beyond liking the latest book the best, but frequent *EQMM* contributor Robert Barnard is an exception. In an interview in the January/February 1996 issue of *Mystery Scene,* he sings the praises of *Death of an Old Goat* (1974), *Sheer Torture* (1981; American title *Death By Sheer Torture), Out of the Blackout* (1985), *Political Suicide* (1986), *The Skeleton in the Grass* (1987), *A City of Strangers* (1990), and *A Scandal in Belgravia* (1991), but warns readers off *The Missing Brontë* (1983; American title *The Case of the Missing Brontë*), *Little Victims* (1983; American title *School for Murder),* and *A Hovering of Vultures* (1993). Of the two novels most recently reprinted by Penguin at $5.95 each, Barnard speaks fondly of *Corpse in a Gilded Cage* (1984) but disparages *The Cherry Blossom Corpse* (1987; British title *Death in Purple Prose).* The latter book, set at a romance writers' convention, is one I remember as hugely enjoyable, but then I never met a Barnard novel or story I didn't like, including his latest pseudonymous foray into historical fiction. *** Robert Barnard as Bernard Bastable: *Too Many Notes, Mr. Mozart,* Carroll & Graf, $21. In the parallel universe of this novel, second in the Mozart series, the great composer did not die a young man but lived on to become music tutor to Princess Victoria, likable and precocious heiress presumptive to the British throne, in 1830. The combination of court intrigues, murder, historical revision, and distinctive Barnard humor in Mozart's first-person

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narration make this another winner.

**** Sharyn McCrumb: *The Rosewood Casket,* Dutton, $23.95. In the fourth novel of the author's Appalachian series, dying farmer Randall Stargill's four sons—a local naturalist who entertains and instructs school children as Daniel Boone, a country-western singing star, a Cincinnati businessman, and a military officer—set to work hand-building a coffin according to their father's wishes. Also involved are a developer seeking farm land to build houses on, the ghost of a small girl who wanders the woods, some unidentified human bones, and Sheriff Spencer Arrowood's local police force. McCrumb, always enjoyable, is at her best in this series. She is one of the finest novelists currently working in the mystery-suspense field.

**** Ed Gorman: *Cage of Night,* White Wolf, $5.95. One of suspense fiction's best storytellers is in peak form in the small-town saga of outsider Spence, back from an army tour, whose life is changed by his encounter with homecoming queen Cindy Marie Brasher, the sort of girl he could only dream about in his high-school geekhood. What makes the story of murder, pursuit, and possible extraterrestrials work so well is that nearly all the characters are such recognizably ordinary and likable people. Gorman asks the usual dark suspense questions: Can the story possibly end happily? Are the terrors supernatural or mundane? At the end, most of the questions have been answered, but the reader still wonders what will happen next.

*** Francis M. Nevins, Jr.: *Into the Same River Twice,* Carroll & Graf, $21. Eighteen years after his previous book-length appearance in *Corrupt and Ensnare,* law professor Loren Mensing returns, seeking a lost love and a wide-ranging conspiracy in 1987 New York and St. Louis. The author's three self-identified influences are all apparent: two highly ingenious dying messages à la Ellery Queen appear, one of them in a self-contained short story in the first chapter (first published as "Murder of a Male Chauvinist," *EQMM,* May 1973); the second chapter has a lady-vanishes situation out of Cornell Woolrich; and the central plot involves citizen dissatisfaction with the adversarial justice system that was Erle Stanley Gardner's home ground. Nevins's combination of these elements is both distinctive and totally involving.

** John B. Spencer: *Quake City,* The Do-Not Press, P. O. Box 4215, London SE23 2QD; £5.99. Though private eye Charley Case tells his tale in Chandler-

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esque forties style, he lives in 21st-Century Los Angeles, now an island separated from the mainland in the great 'quake of 1997. You may lose track of the routine plot, but the telling and some of the s.f. elements will probably keep you reading. The British author writes pretty good *faux* American, but the phrase "assist [the police] with their enquiries" and the terms "windscreen" and "baseball pitch" (referring to the field, not the throw) betray him.

A rating for Stephen King's serial novel *The Green Mile* will have to wait until all six installments are published. For now, be advised that Part 1, *The Two Dead Girls* (Signet, $2.99), set in 1932 at a Southern prison's equivalent of death row, demonstrates the sense of background and character and the storytelling mastery that have made its author so overwhelmingly successful and popular.

Gambling and games-playing stories from *EQMM* and *AHMM* are gathered in *Win, Lose, or Die* (Carroll & Graf, $21), edited by Cynthia Manson and Constance Scarborough and including contributors as diverse as John Steinbeck, Agatha Christie, Anthony Boucher, Ruth Rendell, Stanley Ellin, Jack Ritchie, Lord Dunsany, and "Pat Hand" (pseudonym of historical novelist Thomas B. Costain). Other inventive theme anthologies from the two magazines have self-explanatory titles: *Senior Sleuths* (Berkley, $5.99), edited by the same team and including such admirable figures as Phyllis Bentley's Miss Phipps and William Brittain's Mr. Strang, and *Mysterious Menagerie* (Berkley, $5.99), edited by Manson alone, featuring an especially nice cover by an uncredited artist and names like Asimov, Wodehouse, Hoch, and Chesterton on the contents page.

Enthusiasts of real-life mysteries should seek out *Murder and Spies, Lovers and Lies* (Avon, $12.50), in which historian Marc Mappen recounts and weighs the evidence in eighteen American controversies, most of them either definitely or arguably criminous, e.g. Lizzie Borden, Sacco and Vanzetti, the Lindbergh kidnapping, and the deaths of Meriwether Lewis, Marilyn Monroe, and Martin Luther King, Jr. His accounts are entertaining and even-handed, his conclusion usually running to the least sensational (and most likely) solution, and he includes valuable annotated bibliographies.

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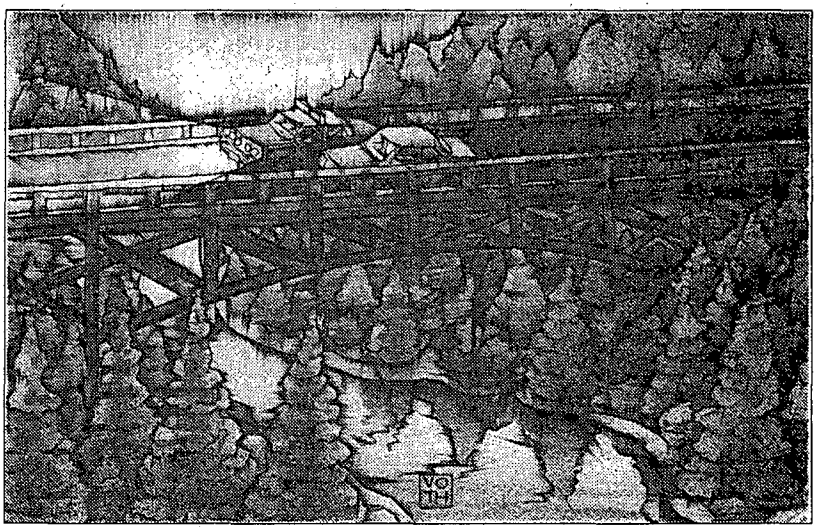

Art by Greg Voth

DEAD MONEY

by Perri O'Shaughnessy

Through his sunglasses, darkly, Tim Breen watched Sunday-morning sun heat the fence outside the sheriff's office, sending steam streaming off the fence and the roof of the town library next door. It had been raining for a month, but today would be clear.

All around the little Sierra foothill town of Timberlake the forest whistled and cawed, rustled and stirred. The gullies along West Main Street ran like creeks, splashing up water as the muddy cars rolled by. He watched a mallard sail down one, making for the river, sun glistening on its iridescent green head. As it passed, it rasped out some quacks, like an old man laughing at him.

He watched the town come out to dry, thinking, now they'll bring me all the trouble they've been storing up behind their screen doors. He liked it better dull and sleepy in the rain, nobody bothering him. He was burned out, and he knew it, but he hid it behind his lumbering good-natured facade.

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Warm yeast smells drifted toward him from the Ponderosa Coffee Shop across the street. At ten-fifteen, more or less, he was usually there, eating donuts and drinking coffee with Bodie Gates, the other deputy assigned to the tiny Timberlake station.

He still had half an hour. He pulled the missing persons report on Roy Ballantine out of his pocket, scanned it again.

Anita Ballantine had been waiting for him at eight when he rode into the parking lot in the patrol car: wound tight from anger or fear; he couldn't tell which. Inside, while he washed out the coffeepot and settled himself behind his old metal desk, she had told him about Roy Ballantine, who had gone AWOL in the night.

He knew Roy, the local agent for Gibraltar Insurance Company. Roy worked out of a storefront office three doors down and across the street.

Anita said Roy had never stayed out all night before. He had to be at work at eight A.M., and he never missed a day. He had taken the car about ten the night before, saying he was going to the liquor store for beer. The car, a 1992 Honda Prelude, was in good shape, but maybe he'd gone for a drive in the woods, God knows why, broke down, and passed a cold Saturday night out there.

Tim had listened, noticing that Anita had gotten thinner over the winter. Her skin was so white he could see the blue veins in her neck. He had written down the license number and promised to check it out, telling Anita he was sure everything would be all right.

It was probably nothing, but he'd have to do something about it. He stuffed the paper back in his pocket, a little angrily. The duck floated out of view, ruffling its feathers, and he went back into the station.

❖ ❖ ❖

Although they have so far published only two novels and a half dozen short stories, the O'Shaughnessy sisters are already figures on the world mystery scene. Their first novel, *Motion to Suppress,* sold in Britain, Holland, Germany, and Israel, and was a featured book club choice in Germany. In August a new book, *Invasion of Privacy,* was released in the U.S. by Delacorte. †

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First he woke up Henry Salas with his phone call. Henry had been on shift at Timberlake Liquors the night before. Roy hadn't shown up there, for beer or anything else.

Then he drove down the highway and out of town, toward the Feather River Bridge, the tall firs along the road black against the strong sun. Across the bridge, six miles farther south down the highway, at Camden, there was an all-night supermarket that sold Roy's brand of beer.

As he got on the two-lane bridge, forty feet above the swollen brown torrent below, he saw Roy's black Prelude parked on the right, smack against the bridge railing. He turned on his lights and parked behind the car.

Nobody inside. On the front seat of the unlocked car, Tim found Roy's wallet with twenty-six bucks in it. The backseat was covered with suit ties, paper cups, and burger wrappers, quite a few files, some girlie magazines. Like most insurance agents, Roy did a lot of business out of his car.

No blood smears, no sign of violence, but all wrong. Tim looked up ahead, looked back down the road.

Looked over the metal rail, about four feet high, coated with corroded green paint and bird guano, and down, where the river was pouring by.

Back to the Prelude. He searched it thoroughly this time. No note in the glove compartment, current registration above the driver's side visor. Keys in the ignition, shit. He got in and started it up, using his handkerchief. The engine roared. No breakdown here.

He called Bodie from his car radio and asked for backup and binoculars. Then he drove slowly the rest of the way across the bridge, searching with his eyes, and all the way to the Camden supermarket. The manager there made some calls. None of the night clerks had seen Roy. He'd never made it that far.

When Tim got back to the bridge, Bodie was leaning over the rail, his hand shading his eyes. "Some good-sized trout down there," he said. His uniform hung on him. Still a growing boy, six feet four and rising, he weighed a hundred sixty pounds after dinner and cake.

Tim handed him the report from Anita, said over the roar below, "Roy Ballantine. He may be a jumper. But there's no note."

"I see the car keys," Bodie said. "I brought a couple pairs of fishing boots, like you said."

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"Let's get started, then." The two deputies climbed down the slick, weedy, muddy bank on the west side of the bridge, in the direction of the water flow, and started poking through the underbrush every few feet.

By noon they had covered both sides up to a half mile down. They had found the carcass of a dog, about a million beer cans, and somebody's bra, and they were half blind from the reflections off the river, but Ballantine hadn't turned up.

They went back to town, changed clothes, ate at the diner down the street, and called in a local construction crew to search the remaining half-mile stretch down to the Falls. Anita called in and said she'd had no word. Tim told her he'd have to hold on to the Prelude for a while, and told her not to worry, but she was a smart girl. A few minutes later, he saw her in her old Mercedes heading toward the bridge.

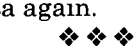
The foreman of the crew came in at five to report that his men had searched the full mile down to the portage camp above Timberlake Falls, then hiked down around and had a look at the dense foliage at the bottom, where the rocks were. "Nothing," he said. "You're gonna have to bring in a diver. Why would Ballantine jump anyway? He was lookin' happy last Saturday night at the Elks, real happy. He won at least two hundred bucks playin' poker."

Tim said, "Thanks, buddy. Send me the bill," and then he went out on the front porch of the sheriff's office, where he'd set up a folding chair, and thought.

The spring sun cast sharp shadows down the street, filtered here and there by the trees. He half-expected to see Roy come meandering down the sidewalk, returned from some backwoods bacchanalia, dirty and beat. But Roy didn't oblige.

Aside from the Elks Club and the Episcopal Church, the Ballantines kept to themselves. They had two kids in the elementary school. Roy and Anita had problems, but Tim had never received one of those late-night help-he's-trying-to-kill-me calls. They had moved to Timberlake five years before, when Roy transferred in from San Francisco. Anita missed the big city. She still visited family there about once a month.

He left Bodie on the phone to his girlfriend. He felt tired, and he wanted to go home and hide like he'd been doing for a long time, but he had to talk to Anita again.



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In the big white rambling Cape Cod on the edge of town, Anita was sitting in the dark dining room, curtains drawn, a bottle of expensive Chardonnay mostly empty on the table, a glass in her hand. She was usually careful about makeup and hair, but tonight she had pulled her long red hair into a ponytail and let the freckles show, and she was wearing one of Roy's old flannel shirts.

She jumped up when Tim came in, said, "Did you find him?" breathlessly, and when he had to tell her no, she sat back down with a thump and put her face in her hands while he told her about the search.

After a minute or two she stirred and said in a hostess voice, "I'm forgetting my manners. Let me pour you a glass of wine."

"Water or a soda would be fine," he said.

"Come on," she said. "You're off duty now. I heard you can drink the whole town under the table."

"I don't do that anymore."

"Oh," she said. "You got religion. How trendy. How middle-aged." She shuffled into the kitchen in her floppy slippers, came back with ice water.

"Ginny's out back," she said. "Roy rigged up a tree house for her and Kyle. Would you like to see it?"

"Some other time."

"I told them Roy had to go out of town. I didn't think I ought to—you know. Yet."

He had put it off as long as he could. "I'm not much good in the tact department, Anita. I hope you'll take this right. I need to know, has Roy been talking about suicide? Did he have any problems that were getting him down? Sleepless nights, signs of depression? Secrets?"

Anita said, "I've been sitting here all day, thinking about his car on the bridge. I suppose that's what Roy's done, committed suicide. I thought you came here to tell me you found his body."

"Did he give you any indication—" Anita cocked her head, raised her eyebrows, smiled brightly.

"Indication? No, he was actually quite specific. How he didn't love me anymore. How he hated this stupid town and all you rednecks riding around in your pickups. How if he never saw another tree it would be fine with him. He applied for a transfer, but the company's cutting back, and he was lucky to have this job. So he smiled and schmoozed all day and lay awake at night staring up toward the ceiling."

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Her voice trailed off, having dumped its emotion.

"Funny. I thought he liked it here," Tim said.

"He was bored," Anita said. "Bored with me and the kids. Roy never wanted to sell insurance. He wanted to be sailing a yacht in the Aegean, with a white cap and his arm around a teenager's waist. Then Ginny came. And Kyle the next year. How interesting. We're both talking about him in the past tense. He's probably going to come walking through the front door any minute, pissing and moaning about his dinner being late."

"Was he a good swimmer?"

"What do you mean by that? He was trying to kill himself, so he wouldn't be swimming hard to save himself. Would he? And the water's freezing, how could he survive? He's dead, Mr. Deputy. Go find him."

"Keep your spirits up," Tim said.

"Actually, I'm drinking 'em down," Anita said, waving the wine bottle. She stopped herself after a second, and set the bottle carefully back on the table. "Whether he comes back or not, Timothy Breen, I don't want you telling anybody what I just said. About my marriage. About how Roy felt. I talked too much. Under the circumstances." She straightened up in the chair, put her hand out to her hair. "Who knows. If he does turn up, mustn't hurt his business. Insurance agent, you know, he's like a preacher or funeral director. You know, stable, good marr—marriage. . . Elks."

"If he's dead, that won't matter, Anita."

"It matters to me."

"I can't promise, Anita. But I sure won't hurt you unnecessarily."

She smiled humorlessly, put her elbows on the table and her head in her hands. "All you care about is your stinkin' self," she said. "Gonna use my weakness against me."

He let it pass. She was talking to Roy, he knew that.

Just before six, back in town, he stopped into Gibraltar Insurance and talked to Roy's secretary, Kelly Durtz, the daughter of the mayor. Though she was eighteen, she looked about fourteen years old and had the brains of a pigeon. Roy wouldn't have confided in her.

She let him go through Roy's desk. Everything was in order, some files on the desk, a pen set from his wife, certificates and family photos on the walls. No note, no private desperate musings stuck away in a corner of a drawer. Kelly locked up and left with him, walked toward home two blocks away.

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Tim locked up, too, leaving his home number on the answerphone in case of emergency. Timberlake was too small to justify a 911 service. People were leaving, not arriving. Soon enough they'd have to close the sheriff's substation there, and he'd have to move somewhere or take up a new trade.

He drove home, five minutes away, off the highway and down two hundred feet of gravel road, startling a buck and doe browsing in the brush at the turnoff. He really should get a dog.

He turned on the lamp in the main room of his cabin, went into the kitchen, and microwaved three burritos. After setting them on his kitchen table, breathing in their beany aroma, he got the big bottle of strawberry Gatorade out of the fridge, not bothering with a glass.

He ate, watched TV, had a shower, got into bed with the old Ross Macdonald he was reading, keeping half an ear open for the sound of the phone or tires crunching in the driveway, but nothing happened. Nothing much ever did happen.

Right before he turned out the light, he thought to himself, *I thought he liked it here.* He hadn't really known Roy. No one had really known Roy, and no one really knew Tim either.

And then he thought, no body turned up, you have to wonder, what if Roy faked it? He lay there on the lumpy bed that gave him backaches and chewed on that thought for a long time.

As usual, he slept badly. Outside, the crickets built their wall of sound, and the moths mated in a flutter of wings around his porchlight, and a bullfrog raised his nightly ruckus down by the river, but Tim pulled the covers over his head because he didn't want to hear it. The forest made him crazy, he didn't know why.

The next morning when Angel Ramirez opened up at the bank, Tim was there, and he got Angel to look up Roy's accounts without a warrant. Angel, now, had that bad habit of driving to neighboring towns late at night and peeking into windows when the urge got too strong. Tim had helped him into a diversion program the year before, and Angel still saw Doc Ashland every week. If he was still peeping, he had gotten too discreet for Tim to hear a whisper of it.

"He has the individual checking account, in his name only, a joint checking account with his wife's name on it too, a business account, and a trust account," Angel said. "Here're the last month's statements on each of the four."

Inflow, outflow, some bounced checks on the individual accounts.

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Like everybody, Roy and Anita spent more than they took in.

The trust account showed a big check being cashed for a client ten days before. "I'd like to see this one," he told Angel.

Made out to Roy Ballantine, as a Gibraltar agent, and Peter Bayle, jointly, the check was for two hundred fifty thousand dollars. Gibraltar Insurance had already cleared it.

"Settlement check," Angel explained.

"Why put Roy's name on it?"

"The company always puts both names on it so the agent can make sure he's got a signed release before the client can cash it. There'll be a release-of-liability form back at Roy's office."

"They both have to sign?" Tim said. He looked at the back. Two signatures all right, Royal F. Ballantine, as agent, and Pete Bayle. Different handwriting, the Bayle signature small and crabbed, like old man Bayle himself. "Who brought it in? I assume you cashed out a check this size yourself."

"Roy brought it in. Pete was holed up at home, nursing the broke jaw that got him all this big money," Angel said. "Broke jaw, bruised ribs, lost his spleen."

"He didn't have a lawyer?"

"Let some shyster take one-third of it? Pete's not that stupid. Roy took care of it," Angel said. "He made Pete a good, fair settlement offer. Gibraltar's insured was at fault. There wasn't any issue around it. Pete's got TMJ syndrome, has to have an operation on his jaw, and he's still gonna look a little sideways from head-on, even after the operation."

"What's Pete's number?" Tim said. When the old man picked up, Tim asked, "Pete, you get your check from Gibraltar yet?"

"No, and I ain't paid my rent in two months. I'm gonna call Ballantine tomorrow, kick him in the ass."

"You come to town and see me instead," Tim said. "In the morning." He turned the check over again, looking at the signatures. "Angel," he said, "don't you ever do that again. Make sure both signatories are present."

"Well, I'll be lassoed and laid down," Angel said, his bug eyes through the thick glasses gentle and astonished. "When did Roy turn into a crook? He looked right in my eyes, asked me about the kids—I said to him, where's Pete going to take all that cash, over to the Wells Fargo Bank? And I offered to set Pete up for free checking, but Roy said, no, Pete's buying a hundred acres in Humboldt County, he's moving on—"

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"Cash," Tim said. "Two hundred fifty thousand. Roy stole it, and already spent it, and he killed himself when he couldn't pay back the trust account. Or else he faked a suicide. If he did, he's gone with the money, and his body won't turn up."

"What are you gonna do?"

"Have a donut," Tim said. He looked at his watch and ambled across the street to the Ponderosa.

After a chocolate one and the kind with powdered sugar and two cups of coffee, he was ready to go back to the office. The sun had burned off the early mist, and he could see the plank floor needed a mop job. The red message light on the phone was blinking.

"This is Valerie at the store at the portage point. I found a . . . corpse down at the foot of the Falls. I just left it, but I don't want any kids finding it, it's all beat up, so please come and—" The answerphone had cut out, but he'd heard enough.

On the car radio, Tim called Bodie and said, "Bring Doc Ashland and call Camden to send an ambulance." The donuts had reconstituted to hard round lumps in his stomach.

He had to admit, he was a little disappointed. A part of him that he didn't let anyone see had been rooting for Roy to make it.

He turned right after the bridge and headed down River Road. Downstream, about a mile south, a cluster of cabins sidled along the river, near the top of Timberlake Falls, and there was a store with fishing bait and supplies.

As he drove, he seemed to rush down the road at about the same speed as the flow of the river. He'd never seen it so high or so brown, so brimming with energy. What had made Roy jump in?

He parked in the mud in front of the store. The young woman who came out to meet him looked familiar, though her hair was longer, a nice brown instead of the yellow he remembered, and the plucked eyebrows and lipstick and earrings were gone. She was plainer than she had been, but she looked better, too, healthier. He remembered that line between her eyebrows too, of chronic puzzlement or discontent.

"You took your time. I suppose you don't remember me," she said. "Valerie. From the year after high school, when we were both working at the supermarket in Camden."

"I knew right away it was you," he said.

"It's been a few years."

"Not so many."

"Come on in for a minute." She opened the screen door for him,

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and as he passed into the cool darkness he smelled her scent, vanilla and roses, seemed to feel her hair brush against him, soft as a spider web. She went around the counter and he sat down on a tall stool.

"This place hasn't changed in twenty years," he said, looking around at the old refrigerator unit that held the bait, and the candy bar rack, and the ice cream bin. "I used to ride my bike down here in the summer as a kid, sit out back under the trees and watch the waterfall. The fishermen used to set up nets there and catch the fish just before they went over."

"My husband and I bought the store and the motel last year," Valerie said. "The rain's killed all the business."

"You look good." Her mouth, he remembered that too, the taste of lemonade and whiskey.

"You too, I think. It's hard to tell with those sunglasses on. I've seen you drive by in your patrol car. You used to be such a hell-raiser, if you don't mind my saying so. You were so funny. I guess you must have got ahold of your drinking, becoming a deputy and all."

"I straightened up about five years ago. A.A. did it. Learned a lot. How about you?"

"I kept on until I hit a bad bottom. Went down to Sacramento for detox. That was two and a half years ago."

"You had any slips since?" Tim said. She was so different, calm, mature, not the frenetic girl he had known. He didn't feel inclined to hike down to the foot of the Falls until Bodie got there, anyway.

"Slips? No, I watched my husband start down the tubes where I had been, and I thought for the children I better not give up."

"Whatever works," he said, and she smiled. "So you got married. How many kids do you have?"

"Two boys. They're still little. My mom watches them while I'm working."

"Where's your husband now?"

"He just got laid off from his job in Camden. At the water company. Ed Strickland." She was still looking him over. She said, "You put on weight. You do look older, Tim."

"Last time I saw you, you were lying in the grass behind the market beating time with a bottle of vodka in your hand, singing every verse of 'Hotel California.' "

"I guess that was a good party," Valerie said. "I wouldn't know. I can't remember much about that year."

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"I know what you mean," Tim said. He smiled at her, too. What passed between them then was a recognition, hesitant, tenuous. Not like the old days, when the booze dissolved the barriers. They heard the ambulance siren.

"Guess we better go outside," he said.

"Sure. I'll take you down there."

She walked lightly, jumping along the rocks, wearing a long flowered dress and brown hiking boots. Bodie and Doc Ashland and the med tech followed behind her, carrying the stretcher, and Tim brought up the rear.

The Falls dropped about fifty feet onto sharp rocks. It sounded like static, like white noise overpowering everything else. The water went over fearlessly, even joyfully. He felt something inside himself stir in response.

They scrambled down the steep hill, following the water, out into the brush. "I was running my dog," she said breathlessly. "Over there, by the rocks. The river's so high it's flooded the trail, so we were bushwhacking. And I saw—that black foot sticking out. See it? I didn't go any closer. I just ran up the hill and called."

Tim just barely saw it, a shadow against other shadows. Valerie had sharp eyes. "You go back up, now," he said. "I'll talk to you later."

"He's dead. He went over the Falls. I don't want to see the rest of him," she said. "Okay, then."

Roy Ballantine's body lay face down in the mud, legs spread and knees drawn up. "In that wetsuit, he looks like a big drowned frog," Bodie said. While the medicos moved around the body, Tim and Bodie took pictures and hunted around in the bush. An hour later, they helped load the body on a stretcher. Black-bottomed clouds moved over the sun as the temperature dropped. They were covered with mud. "Let's go up to the store, see if Valerie'll give us some coffee," Tim said.

She did better, finding them chairs to sit on and letting them wash up, too. She had lit the stove, and they sat around it.

"More rain," Doc Ashland said. "It's a record year."

Tim told them about the money and said, "He botched his fake suicide, I'd say. He jumped off the bridge. He was going to climb out of the river downstream, peel off the wetsuit, take the money, and leave town." He felt warm and comfortable. Valerie was behind him, but he could feel her eyes pressing, like soft, curious blue daggers in his back.

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"I've never seen the river this high," Bodie said. "He got carried down the stream and went over. I almost feel sorry for him. He had it worked out pretty well."

"He got bashed up bad going over, so I can't be positive, but I'm thinking all the injuries are consistent with the wet ride he took," Doc Ashland said. "I'll do a complete autopsy tonight. Idiot, thinking he could use the river."

"Good concept, poor execution," Tim said.

"The Great Escape," the doc said. "I thought about it myself back when I was about to get drafted for the Vietnam War. Disappear, start over."

"We didn't find much around him or on him," Bodie said. "No money. If he had a pack strapped to him, it might be downriver. We'll start looking right away."

"He'd need transport once he got out," Tim said. "Bodie, you look hard for a car or motorcycle out there in the trees, too." He got up. "I'm going to have to go tell Anita. You coming, Bodie?"

The crew came back and searched the banks of the river for three days in pouring rain, but they didn't turn up a thing. Doc Ashland finished the autopsy, saying all he could add was that Roy didn't have any alcohol or drugs in his system. And that the cause of death looked like drowning, though Roy was so beat up from the Falls he might have died anyway.

The fourth day, a man in a gray suit came driving up to the sheriff's substation in a brand-new Jeep Cherokee. Tim came out to meet him. "James Burdick, Gibraltar Insurance," he said, shaking hands. "I thought you might have some sun this high up." Burdick was short and solid. He smelled of cigars.

"It'll be back," Tim said.

"I read your report. You sure your men have searched that river high and low for the money?"

"It's not there."

"Because if it doesn't turn up soon, I'm going to have to issue the old man another check. He's hired a lawyer this time and he's making a fearful racket. I don't work directly with the agents, so I didn't know Roy Ballantine. Did you ever think he'd do a thing like this?"

"I'd heard he was gambling, getting into debt. Maybe I should have paid more attention."

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"If we do pay that geezer Bayle off again, we're going to try to recover from Ballantine's estate."

"Anita's going to need money. I doubt she'll be getting any of the life insurance he was loaded up with."

"She can always file bankruptcy," the Gibraltar man said breezily. "Can we go inside? It's freezing out here."

Anita came in to see him the next day. She had fixed herself up, but the old spark had been replaced by something just old. Events like losing a husband could make a woman cross the line into age in one night. Tim had seen it before.

"Let's talk frankly, Anita," he said. Her eyes burned at him for a minute, then extinguished again. "I've been listening to the gossip. I heard some things I need to check out with you."

"Like what?"

"For example, that you were getting ready to leave Roy, take Ginny and Kyle."

"So what if I was?" she said. "So you've been listening to the women in this town, stabbing you in the back when your husband's just died . . ." She started crying, lightly and easily, like the rain falling outside the door. "He'd gambled away our savings. He didn't care about me anymore. Yes, I was thinking about leaving while I still had some self-respect. Of course, he's taken even that away from me now." But the lift of her chin into the air said, he can take everything else, but he won't take my pride.

"Did you know he was going to steal the money?"

"Of course not—"

"Marriage is an odd state. We let another person come so close, they can read our minds," Tim said. "I think you knew."

"I can't believe you're saying this. You're accusing me of killing him so I could have the money, like I dressed him in a wetsuit and tossed him over the bridge? He weighed over two hundred pounds. I don't have to listen to this. I'm going home."

"You might want to wait another few minutes," Tim said.

"Wh-why?"

"Because Bodie's out there searching your house and yard. I'm sorry, we have to be sure." He handed her a copy of the search warrant.

"That woman is so broke, all we found was letters to her sister asking for loans," Bodie said later. "We dug around the backyard,

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knocked holes in the walls, tossed the garage. Found a family of skunks. There's no money there."

"We had to try," Tim said. "You want to eat over at the hotel restaurant tonight? My treat."

"My grampa's in town," Bodie said. "My mom's making a turkey. You're more than welcome. . . ."

"No, you go on. I've got my heart set on a piece of apple pie from the restaurant," Tim said.

He locked up at five. It was a warm clear night, and the street was lined with the cars of the isolated cabin owners from miles around who didn't get into town that often. He saw some loggers from Camden he knew, said hello, walked up the wooden steps to the Placer Hotel Restaurant.

After dinner he was trying to make up his mind whether to drive to Camden for a movie or go home when he saw Valerie's husband out front, careening toward his car. He hustled over and took his arm, saying, "Oh no you don't."

"Leggo," Ed Strickland said. He was a strong boy, but Tim got him over to the sheriff's-station porch and half threw him into his chair.

"Stay there while I call a taxi. You can't drive like that," he said. Strickland's disheveled blond hair fell across his eyes and he blew out cheap Scotch vapors.

"I'll just go back to the hotel if you're gonna make a federal case out of me having a few," he said.

"You need to go home."

"The hotel is my home, Mr. Deputy, sir," Strickland said. "I moved there recently."

"Valerie and you . . ."

"It's all her fault," Strickland said. "She wanted to buy the damn place. Then the tourists stayed away because of the rain. I got laid off. Then she threw me out because I couldn't find any other work. It's not my fault. She's a hard-hearted b—"

"Watch your mouth," Tim said. "If you don't have any money, how are you paying to live at the Placer Hotel?"

Strickland gave him a sly look from under the hair. "You ever played poker with me? I have had one humongous streak lately. Best of all, she hasn't got any paycheck stub to look at, so she can't come after me for some of it. Can I go now?" He got up and wove across the street, waving away the traffic. Tim sat down, watching.

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The next morning, early, he drove back to the portage point. Gray fog seeped around the dripping trees. Valerie opened the door to the motel office, looking surprised and maybe pleased to see him. She still wore her robe, a long blue silky thing. Her hair was wet from the shower. She hastily took off the specs she was wearing, invited him in.

"The kids just left for school," she said. "They left some eggs in the pan."

"Sounds good," Tim said. While he ate in the warm little kitchen, she washed the dishes. Finally, she sat down across the table from him with her coffee. She said, "I know you have some business or you wouldn't have come. So go right ahead."

"It's about Ed," Tim said.

"Ed? Did he do something?"

"I don't know. He says you and he have split up."

"Trust Ed to tell everybody in town," Valerie said.

"When did this happen?"

"Oh, I guess it was the day after I found Roy. Ed and I, we never were suited for each other. We were party pals, you know what I mean? When I sobered up, I found out there was nothing else between us."

"He's got a fancy room at the Placer Hotel," Tim said. "How does he pay for it?"

"Well, I can tell you he doesn't pay on credit. We have no credit," Valerie said. "He isn't working around here, or I'd know it. I suppose he's having a winning streak."

Her robe softened the hard planes of her face. Her damp hair shone like satin. He wanted to touch it. He drank some more coffee and said, "I didn't know there really were such things."

"You stop believing in all that nonsense when the drinking stops," she said. "Yeah. He might be winning this week, but next week is another thing entirely. He doesn't think that way, though."

"Not like us," Tim said. "Upright and sober. I'm thinking maybe Ed found the body with the money before you got out there, picked a fight with you, and left."

Valerie's jaw dropped. She shook her head. "You mean he might have two hundred fifty thousand dollars socked away somewhere? I can't believe it. He could never keep it a secret. He'd just have to brag about it."

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"Now that you think about it, did you notice anything in his behavior that day, you know, going outside for a long time, anything like that?"

"Just the usual foul mood when he has a hangover," Valerie said. "I slept late that morning and didn't go out with Ginger for her walk until ten. But I still—"

"I hate being sober," Tim said. He rubbed his jaw, wondering what brought that comment on. She would understand, that was it. He could talk to her, and she would understand. "You ever feel that way?"

She stayed right with him, as if he hadn't suddenly changed the subject. "I know what you mean," she said. "It's like, you went to the optometrist, and he fit you with powerful glasses, and the whole world springs into this vivid focus. And it's the same old ugly world you drank to escape from, and you can see every dirty crevice again. . . ." She looked around the shabby kitchen, at the cracked linoleum and the broken highchair in the corner.

"Yeah. Like you used to love riding the Ferris wheel, and now all you notice is the operator's tired and mean, hates his job, and doesn't like you," Tim said.

Valerie nodded. "I look back, and it's like we used to live in the night, under those romantic hazy-colored lights, and now it's daylight. It's too sharp and bright, isn't it?"

He sat there looking at her. She had that ironic, crooked smile he'd seen on so many drunks at so many meetings. "Yeah. They keep trying to convince you it's better," he said. "It's worse, but you can't escape anymore. You're gonna die if you keep boozing, shooting up, whatever you're doing."

"Condemned to real life," she said, laughing a little. "Forced to grow up."

"I could love you now," he said. "We've both been through it."

"Quit kidding yourself," she said. "You could have loved me years ago, when we were kids and drunk all the time, but not now. You can't fall in love unless you can get out of your head."

"Normal people do it."

"They're just born insensitive. Born lucky. So we sobered up, and you turned into a depressed cop. And I turned into an unhappy housewife. We're big successes now."

"There was something brave about what we were doing," Tim said. "You know? And now we don't even have that."

"We are the driest of dry drunks," Valerie said. She got up and

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came around the table to him. She took his big head in her hands and drew him to her breast, and his arms went around her little waist. "Maybe this will help," she said.

"Maybe."

"We could give it a try anyway. Even if it only lasts a minute."

"Count on it lasting a little longer than that."

"Sobriety sucks, it really does," she said.

"Yeah. The whole situation. Take your pants off, okay?"

Tim put Bodie on Ed Strickland for the next couple of days. Bodie reported that Strickland sat in on three or four regular floating poker games at Camden and at Timberlake. He seemed content to hang around town, like he was waiting for something to happen.

After the second day, Tim got another search warrant, and he and Bodie tore up Strickland's room at the Placer Hotel. But they didn't find anything. The Strickland bank account contained about enough money for next week's groceries.

The Gibraltar man called. "Are you closing the investigation after the inquest tomorrow?" he said. "I need a final report for the records so I can issue another check for Bayle and get this thing over with."

"You're going to give up on finding the money?"

"Let me put it to you this way," Burdick said. "You're Joe Schmoe with a mortgage, fishing along the riverbanks, and what do you snag but a bag full of a fortune in cash? What do you do with it?"

"You tell me."

"You dry out the bills on an inside clothesline. You wait a few months, and you start spending it slowly and carefully, and you thank your lucky frigging stars," Burdick said with a laugh. "We call it dead money. Now and then it slips through the cracks. You're never going to find it."

At the inquest the next day, nothing came out that Tim hadn't heard before. He gave his testimony, and they all called it a day and sloshed over to the hotel for lunch. The coroner's verdict was accidental death in the course of committing a crime, and Tim had no evidence to the contrary, except they still hadn't found the money.

He went back to the office, took care of other business, locked

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up, went home, and looked in the freezer. Burritos. One of those supermarket pizzas that tasted like paper.

He looked around the place. Something was missing. Oh yeah, Becky and little Dave. They had moved to Illinois. His ex-wife had some kind of restraining order.

He was sick of being struck with that thought ten times a day. Something was stinging his eyes. He was damn bored and damn lonely, and he was sick and tired of being bored and lonely, of listening to the forest outside and not being a part of anything.

Next thing he knew, he was on the phone to Valerie. "Can I come over for a while?" he said.

"Wait until nine or so," she said. "I'll get the kids to bed early."

He couldn't bring wine, so he stopped and bought her some flowers at the florist shop at the hotel. She opened the door, holding her finger to her lips, and led him directly into the bedroom. The sheets and pillowcases smelled like vanilla and roses, like her. She comforted him, and he did what he could for her.

Sometime later he woke out of a doze, to the clicking of a key being inserted into the kitchen door. Valerie woke up too. He got up quickly, pulling his service revolver out of the holster hung on the bedpost. Valerie tiptoed behind him as he walked down the hall.

Ed Strickland had his head in the refrigerator. When he saw them, his bloodshot eyes went wide and he let out a strangled yell. "You been sleeping with him!" he said. "I'll fix you—"

"Shut up, you prick," Valerie said. "I'll sleep with him if I want. Get out."

"This is my house," he yelled, stumbling toward them, his fists up.

"Get away, Ed. Go on, leave," Tim said. He kept the gun down, but Strickland charged him, still yelling, grabbing for it. They locked in a furious embrace, Tim trying to keep the gun off him. Valerie ran over by the stove. Strickland smashed him in the face, a big dangerous drunk. They wrestled for the gun—

Tim heard the explosion, saw Strickland's head bloom out red on one side, and then Strickland crumpled on the ground and the kids were standing in the doorway holding each other and screaming—

The sheriff, Bud Ames, came thirty miles from the county seat for

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the investigation. They took Tim's badge. Valerie backed him up all the way. The coroner called it an accident, and he got his badge back. But he knew that when the time came for layoffs of county staff, he'd be right up there on the list.

About a week after the Strickland inquest he went back to Valerie's. Her kids acted afraid of him. Valerie said maybe they shouldn't see each other anymore. The pain he felt when she said that shocked him. He hadn't known he was in love with her.

He went back to his routine.

April passed. The sun came out, the dazzling mountain sun that the tourists loved. He arrested drunks, rode patrol, issued citations, played dead. Or maybe he was dead.

He kept seeing the two deer when he drove home at dusk. They must have a nest under one of the trees not far from the cabin. As the weather warmed, the birds had returned to raise hell at dawn.

On another Saturday night, he had just finished his dinner at the Placer Hotel when the desk clerk came over, the mayor's other daughter, the smart one. "I guess I shouldn't say this, but I hope you don't feel too bad about what happened," she said. "Strickland used to sit up in his room and drink, and then he'd lurch down the stairs looking for trouble. If you hadn't killed him, he might have killed somebody else, like his wife."

"I appreciate the thought," Tim said. He sipped his decaf, thinking about Strickland's face when he turned around and saw Tim there in the house.

"Why'd she call him?" the clerk said. "If I was separated from him, I would have left well enough alone."

"Valerie called him? At the hotel?"

"She called him that night," the clerk said. "You know, the night he . . . died. They didn't talk long, but he didn't look upset or anything when he came down. He left right after."

"Excuse me," Tim said. He picked up the check with trembling hands and took it to the cashier.

"You okay?" she said.

"Fine. Do me a favor, call Anita Ballantine and tell her I'll be over to see her in about ten minutes." He drove carefully out to the Ballantine house.

"Hello, Timothy," Anita said. "Do you have some more bad news for me?" She was haggard, her body lost in the heavy sweater.

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He said, "Anita, did you get your March phone bill?" When she nodded, he said, "Go get it. Please."

When she came back, he unfolded it and stood there reading the numbers in the lamplight. "What is it?" she said.

"Nothing," he said. "Just something I had to check."

"You took your shades off," she said.

"I lost them," he said.

He drove out River Road to the portage point. The rain had finally stopped, but the roads were still slick. The motel sign was lit, and he could see she had a good crowd. He parked along the road and walked into the forest, toward the river, avoiding the motel.

The moon floated behind thin cirrus that veiled the stars, but he could see well enough. The pines were thick enough here that not much brush grew under them. He walked on, pushing away the wet boughs, his throat dry and something pressing on his chest, until he came to the clearing at the top of the Falls.

Just before the drop-off, the riverbank rocks narrowed the river down to twelve or so feet across. He got down next to the narrows, felt around in the wet dirt.

The metal anchor in the ground was still there. He remembered how, as a kid, he had watched some of the men net-fishing one summer. They had stretched netting across the river at the narrows, tying it firmly to the metal anchors on either side.

Those nets were strong, to catch many fish in a very fast current.

For quite a long time he stared out over the river. Moonlight fell heavily on it, but it rushed ahead, dark and unstoppable.

He turned slowly and walked over to the motel that backed onto the clearing.

Valerie answered the door. She stepped back when she saw him and sent the kids off into the other room. The kitchen table was piled high with magazines. Tim went over and looked at the covers.

"Next time, please call first if you need to see me," she said. "I already told you—"

"The Bahamas," Tim said. "I read those travel magazines, too. I see myself on a green mountainous island, sitting on the sand, looking out at turquoise water, with a pitcher of ice-cold daiquiris right next to me."

"What do you want?" she said.

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"I like that flowered dress. I bet Roy liked it too. That's the dress you were wearing the day you found his body."

"Is it?" she said.

"He called you four times in the two weeks before he died. Now, why would he do that?"

"Who?"

"Ballantine. Roy."

"No, he didn't call me. Do you have some kind of phone record? Maybe he called Ed. They were both gamblers."

"You're so beautiful. So harsh and so beautiful," Tim said. "How could he resist?"

"Me and Roy? Don't be ridiculous."

"He would jump over the bridge, and you would catch him at the narrows just before the Falls and pull him out. He'd strip off the wetsuit and you'd drive out to the airport with him and fly away from all the bad things."

"No!"

"That's what Roy thought, anyway. Was he willing to take your kids? Then when Roy was gone, were you worried that Ed would stay on your case, figure it out eventually? You remember old Ed, don't you? You called him at the hotel and asked him to come to the house. The clerk told me."

"No!" Valerie said, backing away. "You're crazy, Tim. Just because I won't have you after what happened—calm down, let me make you a cup of coffee. Let's talk—" She reached up into the high cabinet and Tim caught a glimpse of the gun.

"Don't touch it," he said. "You think I'd come here unarmed? We searched this place. I knew you'd have it somewhere handy. Close the cabinet. Come toward me with your hands up."

"Tim—"

"No more bullshit."

Her shoulders slumped. She seemed about to fall. He brought her over to the table and made her sit, sat down across from her. Cracked linoleum, greasy stove, one soft flowing flowered dress to wear—"Valerie," he couldn't help saying, "I loved you."

She raised her head, and he saw something ancient and inhuman behind her eyes. It was the thing that had made her drink, still alive inside there. He had to look away.

"You were supposed to catch him at the narrow spot, weren't you?" he said.

She shrugged and said, "It would have been a very small risk. I

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knew how to use the net. Yeah. Catch him, and then we'd leave with the money. That was his plan."

"Did you try? You lost your grip, he went on by?"

"No."

He had to breathe a minute, hard, before he could say, "You let him go by, over the Falls?"

"I let him go." Her mouth, that had kissed him so tenderly, saying those things—

"What did he do to you, that you would let him die like that?"

"It was what he would do to me someday. I thought it over. I just wanted to be alone."

She was alone, she would always be alone. "Why didn't you strip off the wetsuit? I might have bought the suicide."

She backed away, saying in a hopeless, hostile voice, "I planned to. But when I saw him, the . . . injuries, I couldn't stand to touch him."

"You had it made."

"You know how it is, Tim. At the last minute, you sabotage yourself. You realize you're a loser, you don't have the strength to carry it off. Maybe if you'd been with me—but I wanted to be alone. That's all I wanted—"

"I'll have to take the money back," Tim said, interrupting.

"I don't have it." She had realized he wouldn't help her. Her mouth tightened, turned bitter.

"Of course you have it. He wouldn't risk floating down the river with it. No reason to. You were holding it. Go and get it."

"I tell you, I don't have it."

Tim said gently, "Write it off. It's dead money for you now. If you don't give it to me I'll have to tear your house apart, dig up your land. If you tell me now, I'll say I found it somewhere else."

She said without any shame or guilt, "All I did was not save him when he was floating down the river. It's not a crime, is it?"

"I don't know. But stealing the money would be a crime, and I can't let you do that. And then, look what you made me do to poor old Ed."

"It's in the fireplace, above the flue. Get it yourself."

He made her walk into the small living room with him. He could hear the TV through the kids' door. "Is this all?"

"All except the back bills I paid. Are you going to tell on me? If you do, I'll just go on over the Falls like he did."

"No. I'm not going to tell."

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She stood in the doorway, glaring as he drove away. "Goodbye, then, you cold bastard," she yelled after him.

When he came to the bridge, where he needed to take a left to go into Timberlake, he took a right instead and drove to the county airport, his right hand caressing the sooty bag. The Southwest Airlines plane bound for San Francisco was circling above, preparing to land. Through the open car windows, rustles and rushings and sighs drifted in on the wind.

He went into the dark airport bar and sat at a small candlelit table overlooking the runway. He placed the bag carefully on the table. "Drink?" the waitress said.

"A double Jack Daniels, straight up."

He picked it up, savored the fumes—

Liquor, money, blurry romance, some faraway place—all he had to do was drink it down, have another, buy a ticket, and drop a postcard in the mailbox resigning as deputy sheriff—

"It's such a beautiful night, isn't it?" the waitress said. "I guess you're not ready for another."

Two hundred fifty thousand dollars. Two hundred fifty thousand dollars—

But it was dead money. He'd be alone like Valerie, resurrecting that presence in the back of his mind that made him drink—

He wasn't completely finished. He wasn't extinguished like Valerie; he could still love somebody. She had taught him that by making a fool out of him.

He was looking down at the table, staring at the little flame guttering in its holder. "Even the candlelight hurts tonight," Tim said. His voice sounded husky and strange.

She leaned down, put her hands on the table as she looked at the candle. "Blow it out, then, honey," she said. "Then the moonlight can come in from outside." She had a strong definite tone of voice and hair sprayed to stand firm against anything.

"You can take this drink away," he said.

"You're not going to have it?" Surprise lit her face.

"Not this time."

"Where you headed?" she said curiously. "San Francisco?"

"Not this time," he said again. As he climbed back into the patrol car, he glanced out the window.

Outside, the plane was landing, its red lights twinkling off the wet tarmac in the soft haze of evening. ●

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The Dibble And Noah Webster

by James Powell

This month *EQMM* has the honor of publishing the 100th story penned by James Powell, a humorist who discovered long ago that the mystery story and the funny story have strong similarities. "Both," he says, "travel down a strongly plotted road, all the while preparing the reader for the punch line." Mr. Powell's 100th work is a traditional suspense story laced with characteristic flights of fancy.

The McCurdy sisters were weeding the circular flowerbed behind their house, Maudie who was seventy-one in new white garden gloves decorated with little strawberries, Sal who was three years older in her worn goatskin leather ones. Both wore old jackets and trousers from their father's wardrobe, Maudie with the cuffs turned up. They moved around the flowerbed slowly, sidling on their knees, Maudie clockwise, Sal counterclockwise, pulling the weeds and carefully cultivating the earth around the late daffodils and the emerging flowers.

As usual, Maudie was the first to stop for a break. She straightened up and arched her back. "Oh, my weary bones," she said. Then she smiled and lightly touched the tops of the ferny little sprouts that looked as if they had only broken through the soil a moment before. "It'll be a bumper year for larkspur," she said.

Sal's grunt combined her gruff agreement with the effort of straightening up.

"I saw old Helen Crowley on my walk yesterday," Maudie continued. "And she said . . ." Here she smacked her lips. " '. . . Well, I

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just don't know who started that story about larkspur reseeding itself. Mine never comes back.' 'And it never will,' I replied. 'Not until you start weeding with your nose in the dirt. My father swore by it. And he was president of the bank.' Well, that Mrs. Crowley gave me the fisheye like my mind's starting to go."

"Good," said Sal. "There's a woman with two wishing wells in her front yard. Two. And she thinks *your* mind is starting to go." Sal snorted and shook her head. "Last week I asked her was the second wishing well a spare in case the first one didn't work. She didn't get it. She thinks I'm getting senile."

"Good," laughed Maudie.

They smiled at each other and at the secret they shared.

For years people could set their clocks by the McCurdy sisters, arm in arm, taking their daily constitutional through town. Until last fall, when suddenly they began taking their walks separately and at unpredictable times and in unpredictable directions, Sal alone with an old tam pulled down over her ears, Maudie alone in her flannel turtleneck.

If two people do the same thing at the same time long enough, they are bound to be thought odd. And if they suddenly stop doing it, they will be thought odder still. But after all, the town remembered, the McCurdy sisters were Halversons on their mother's side and all the Halversons had their certifiable moments. On a shopping trip to Sarnia, for example, someone had once seen Mrs. McCurdy testing Spode china for the heft.

Sal and Maudie went back to work, weeding in silence now, enjoying the good memories the task brought back to them. As children they had gardened with Father while Mother read Dickens aloud to them, sitting in the shade nearby on a wicker armchair Father brought down from the porch for her. Later, when the McCurdy sisters were out of school and had jobs, Maudie at the library and Sal in the art department of a hardware chain with headquarters in Chatham, they always kept Saturday afternoons free for the garden. Even Mother's Halverson temper had been charmed by those peaceful hours outside. Her dark rages always came behind closed doors, sudden bursts of words and objects directed at Father, who bore both stoically. In fact, his love for her was deep and abiding and when she died of a stroke three chapters into *Our Mutual Friend,* his drinking turned heavy and he let his affairs slide. The McCurdy sisters tended the garden themselves after that, while the wicker armchair sitting in the

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weather slowly unraveled into a crazy birdcage. On the day Father died, Maudie and Sal had carried the wicker wreckage down for the trashman.

For the next thirty years the McCurdy sisters lived alone in the big, decaying house, surrendering first one and then another room to leaking roofs, falling plaster, heaving floors, and the cost of heating oil, until all that was left for them was the kitchen, their parents' old bedroom and bath above, and the connecting back staircase.

The McCurdy sisters weeded on. One of their Johnson neighbors started up the lawn mower. Maudie and Sal stared at the ground, pretending not to hear it. A year ago Maudie decided it would be a lark for them to do children's books together, she the writing, Sal the illustrations. Sal agreed but insisted on something like *The Magic Meat Grinder* or *The Brave Little Set of Socket Wrenches,* for she was shy about venturing too far from the hardware things she knew how to draw.

Their most promising venture had been *Lonny the Thoughtful Lawn Mower.* Every week after his owner used him Lonny would sit in the musty toolshed and wonder why lawns had to be cut. Clearly his owner didn't enjoy the job or take any real pleasure in the result. Wondering if there was some law of man or God requiring lawns to be cut, Lonny trundled down the alley to visit the prosperous machine in the lawyer's toolshed, who told him there was no such law of man on the books. Next Lonny visited the grounds of the nearby church where a saintly old lawn mower everyone called "The Rev" assured him none of God's commandments touched on lawns except perhaps about cutting them on Sunday.

But Lonny's question inspired a midnight meeting of all the town lawn mowers. At the noisy gathering a big country-club rider-mower declared that when a faithfully mowed lawn died, it came back as part of the golf course, while good lawn mowers came back as big rider-mowers. Others maintained that men cut the grass because they'd do anything to get out of the house. ("Here, get this," offered Sal when she read Maudie's first draft, "Have a lawn mower call out, 'I say people cut their lawns because they don't want to be . . . uh . . . uh . . . automatic.' And later on Lonny figures out the word the machine was really looking for was 'shiftless.' Get it?" "No, I most certainly do not," said Maudie.)

The lawn mowers finally concluded that grass was cut because that was the way things were. "But that's absurd," Lonny insisted.

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"And if cutting grass is absurd, then we're absurd." A machine in the crowd called Lonny an existentialist. But the thoughtful little lawn mower persisted. "Okay, then try this on for size: Why does each house have to have its own lawn mower when four or five of us could do the whole town?" Suddenly he was being denounced on all sides as an atheistic communist and an advocate of socialized lawn care. A moment later Lonny was running away with a mob of angry lawn mowers in hot pursuit. He managed to escape down an alley and reached his toolshed, where he panted in the darkness while lawn mowers searched the night for him. Here the story stalled. Maudie claimed she couldn't find the right ending.

Finally Sal came up with one of her own. Lonny wakes up one night to this noise like helicopters, with a strange light streaming through the cracks in the toolshed door. Outside he sees this giant lawn mower descending from heaven attended by choirs of weed-whackers and chipper-shredders. And a resonant voice from within the machine tells Lonny that because he was a lawn mower who dared to ask the question why, he would now be raised to another level of lawn mower consciousness. "Or some kind of glop like that," added Sal.

Maudie shook her head. "But that wouldn't be sincere. I mean, you really don't believe there's this Great Lawn Mower out there somewhere."

"Hell no," said Sal. "But you do."

Maudie stood her ground. "I need an ending that gives meaning to Lonny's life, one that's an inspiration to young readers," said Maudie.

Mulling it over in her heart Sal came to suspect Maudie just didn't like the preliminary artwork. So, late one morning after they'd come in from tying up dahlias, Sal put the question to her sister directly. It was Maudie's turn to make lunch. As she poured the can of soup into the saucepan she said, "I admit I hoped for something more cartoony, dear." Looking under the pot to adjust the flame on the gas stove she added, "You know, machines with the corners knocked off. And eyes. And a mouth."

Sal had been sitting at the kitchen table untangling a mare's nest of green garden twine, the remains of a ball that had gotten away from them and rolled away down the yard almost to the garage. "You want whimsy," she said scornfully. "Well, I hate whimsy. I say give the kids the real goods, a lawn mower that looks like a lawn mower, nuts and bolts and all."

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"Here's a for-instance, dear," offered Maudie. "Where Lonny's panting there in the toolshed after his escape, how about drawing lines around his gas tank like, you know, heavy breathing?"

"Huh, I'm way ahead of you, sister," said Sal, winding the untangled twine into a hank around her right hand. "I've rethought that whole bit. First off, it's dark. So that page is black except for this balloon on a string of bubbles with the word 'Whew!' in it with drops of sweat like quotation marks around it." She looked down at her winding. "So there's your panting lawn mower, Miss Know-It-All McCurdy!"

"And how are you going to make Lonny thoughtful? A balloon with a light bulb in it?"

Sal scowled, hating Maudie's superior tone. "Maybe," she said cautiously, afraid she was walking into another of her sister's treacherous little ambushes.

Maudie sprang her trap. "That's only a thought, dear. Not thoughtfulness."

Sal ground her teeth. "Don't worry," she said darkly. "I'll think of something."

As she turned to get the bowls from the cupboard Maudie gave her rendition of Mother's delicately dancing, scornful laugh.

It was a sound that always made Sal boil. Red-faced, she got to her feet and stood behind her sister, snapping the twine between her fists.

"Now if you ask me," continued Maudie, "I think you should try something more like *The Little Engine That Could.*

The Little Engine That Could, eh?" growled Sal. Suddenly she had looped the twine over Maudie's head and crossed her forearms, pulling the twine tightly around her sister's neck. "I think I can," Sal muttered through clenched teeth as the bowls crashed to the floor. "I think I can. I damn well think I can."

Sal ignored Maudie's clawing hands and focused down at the top of her sister's head, watching the skin beneath the thin white hair turn from pink to purple. Maudie's hands were harmless fluttering creatures before Sal's black rage passed and she let go the twine. Maudie fell to the linoleum, retching and making noises as if she had a fish bone caught in her throat.

Sal stood there blinking in astonishment for several minutes before she gathered her sister up and set her down in a kitchen chair. Then she dashed to the refrigerator and wrapped ice cubes in a tea towel. She had Maudie hold the compress to her throat to

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keep the swelling down while she pounded upstairs for the salve to put on the broken skin. She was crying when she came back down with it. Maudie was crying, too. Sal told her many times how sorry she was. And Maudie nodded to show she understood.

It was several days before Maudie could speak above a croak, and several weeks before Sal could look at that mark around her sister's neck without having to turn away with tears in her eyes. They sat together for many hours holding hands and telling each other that everything was going to be all right. They never spoke of Lonny the Thoughtful Lawn Mower or the subject of children's books again.

It wasn't until early fall that the McCurdy sisters got back into their usual routine. One evening Sal was up in the bedroom with her drawing board, working on one of her inventions, when Maudie, who had been ironing down in the kitchen, came up and started searching for something in Father's chest of drawers. Sal paid her no attention until Maudie asked, "Have you seen the dibble?"

"What the hell's a dibble?" she demanded.

"The pointy wooden thing with a ball for a handle, for making holes for planting bulbs."

"You mean the bulb planter," said Sal. "You always have to call a spade a shovel." She made her thumb and forefinger into a monocle and, looking at her sister through it, said, " 'I say, have you seen the dibble, old thing?' No, I haven't. And I don't think you're going to find it in Father's bureau."

Maudie gave a patient little laugh. "No, I'm looking for his housewife, that khaki roll-up thing they gave him in the army for buttons and needle and thread. I recall he had a needle threader. My eyes won't do the trick anymore. Anyway, the looking made me remember looking for the dibble yesterday and not finding it."

"Well, don't look at me," said Sal. "I haven't seen it since we planted those bulbs last week." Then she added, "You're back reading that damn dictionary again."

Maudie moved her search to another drawer. "I may read what I choose," she said coolly. "And if I choose to add to my vocabulary, it's nobody's business but my own."

"Giving something a fancy name doesn't change anything."

"Mr. Noah Webster's dictionary is a rare goblet where all may come to sip the adamantine water of orthography."

"I guess that means spelling, right?" demanded Sal. "So how do

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you look up a word to see if you're spelling it right if you don't know how to spell it?"

"Mr. Webster was a great scholar," insisted Maudie. "Imagine collecting all the words there were and putting them together without missing a single one."

"Yeah?" said Sal. "Remember what Father told us about collateral for a loan. There were the tangibles, the things you could touch. Then there was the talk, the words. Blue sky, he called it."

"The dictionary is the bright palette we use to paint our hopes and dreams," said Maudie, closing the drawer and moving on to the next.

"Blather," said Sal. "Blather doesn't change anything about the here-and-now. And the hereafter is blue sky. Father would have called Noah Webster a blather monger, a piffle merchant. And Mother, why she never used a word in an argument if there was a piece of china handy."

"Not just china, dear," Maudie corrected her. "Mother threw Spode. A name. A word." (In her fights with Father, Mother would have considered it beneath her Halverson blood to throw anything less than Spode or Minton, as if daring Father to tell her not to so she could call him a low, bean-counting bastard.)

"Father would have considered Mr. Webster a Renaissance man," continued Maudie. "In addition to giving us the dictionary, he gained fame as a lawyer and a statesman. He served his country in the Senate and in Presidential cabinets."

Sal looked at her with narrowing eyes. "Hold on a sec."

But Maudie wouldn't be interrupted. As she pulled out the bottom drawer she said, "In fact, back in his home state Mr. Webster's skills as a lawyer were so respected that legend had it he once defended a man who'd sold his soul to the Devil, and Mr. Webster beat the Devil himself in legal argument." Maudie looked up, baffled by the sputtering sounds of her sister pretending to suppress laughter. It was a moment before she realized she had confused Noah Webster with Daniel. Her cheeks burned with shame and her ears turned red.

Sal's body shook with laughter. She pointed at her sister's face and, laughing, said, "Oh, that's rich. That's rich."

Maudie began to shake with anger. She would not be mocked! She would not be humiliated!

"Oh, Father would have loved that one," said Sal, turning away and covering her nose and mouth in a tent of fingers.

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Maudie's anger became fury. "No, he would not!" she shouted. "Shut up! Shut up!" Here her trembling fingers found the scar on her throat. Her eyes grew large with wild discovery and she whispered, "You think you can wring my neck like I'm a chicken." Her hand dropped from the scar to her father's service revolver, which lay in the corner of the bottom drawer as if he'd placed it there for her for just this moment. Snatching it up, Maudie pointed the heavy thing at the back of her sister's head, averted her eyes, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet creased Sal's skull. They couldn't get the doctor. Old Dr. Lohman, who'd had a crush on their mother, might have turned a blind eye. But the new young doctor would've had to report the bullet wound to the police. Sal was in bed for a week with a terrible headache. Maudie nursed her night and day. The wound healed, but it left an ugly scar.

When Sal was up and around again she and Maudie sat talking earnestly together for hours on end. There were no pats or tears or handholding now, only facts to be faced. They both knew that something had to be done.

Maudie and Sal crept toward each other in the circular flowerbed, their weeding almost done. After a while Maudie looked over at her sister as if about to ask something of a delicate nature. "Do 'granny fannies' count?" she whispered, looking back over her shoulder to see if she was being watched from behind. Last fall they'd had their hedge trimmed for the first time since their father died. But it still stood high enough to give them privacy on all four sides.

"I'd allow that," said Sal. After all, Maudie had allowed her the pink plastic flamingo. On their separate walks the McCurdy sisters competed to see who could spot the most lawn decorations. The granny fanny, the painted pine cutout of the rear end of a fat woman leaning over, working in a flowerbed, had been appearing in front yards on the way to Chatham. But Maudie's sighting was the first within the town limits.

"Then that makes my count thirty-nine," said Maudie. "Five geese, nine goslings, four sheep, six lambs, three pheasant (two cocks and a hen bird), four mallard whirligigs and one Woody Woodpecker ditto, three cows (two Holsteins and a Jersey), and five cement gnomes, three freestanding and one each fishing in Mrs. Crowley's wishing wells." She laughed. "So I'm one ahead.

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And I suspect tomorrow I'll find your plastic flamingo." Pleased with herself, Maudie went back to work.

"We'll see about that," said Sal.

When they were almost side by side Maudie exclaimed, "Well, look at this, will you? Here's where it's been all the time." She reached into the central clump of Thalia daffodils and pulled out the sharp spike of polished wood with a ball for a handle. "It's the . . ." She caught herself. "It's the bulb planter," she said.

Sal understood. "No, honey," she started to insist. "It's the dib. . . . It's the dib. . . ." But when she couldn't get her tongue around the silly word she started snorting with laughter. After a struggle she seemed to get control of herself. With her face a wobbly deadpan, she tried again. "Dib . . . , dib. . . ." Finally she had to give in to the laughter. Waving her hands apologetically, she roared until the tears came to her eyes.

Maudie watched, at first quizzical, as though she couldn't understand what her sister was laughing at. "Please stop, dear," she said gravely. But Sal couldn't help laughing. The blood rose in Maudie's face as she remembered the humiliation of her Webster mix-up. "Stop, dear," she warned. But Sal laughed on. It seemed to Maudie that she heard her father's voice join in the laughter.

"Dib . . . , dib . . . , dib . . . ," said Sal breathlessly and doubled over with mirth.

Maudie's face was as purple as her sister's now. She raised both hands over her head and struck. "Dibble!" she shouted as if the word itself was sharp enough to kill. "Dibble! Dibble! Dibble!" And each time she spoke the word she drove the wooden spike into Sal's back. She was crying before she stopped. For a long time she knelt there, looking over at the body of her dead sister.

At last Maudie wiped her face on her sleeve and got up. Stuffing the dibble into her jacket pocket she grabbed Sal's body under the arms and slowly and laboriously dragged it down the yard toward the garage, stopping several times along the way to catch her breath.

The compost heap down by the garage was new. They had started it last fall with the hedge clippings. This March they'd added the mulch of leaves they'd raked from the flowerbeds and the garden rubbish, carrying it down in bushelbaskets, Maudie's mittened hand in one wire handle and Sal's long red fingers in the other. On the ground beside the compost heap lay a weathered old six-paneled door of the kind once called "cross-and-open-Bible."

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Maudie set the body down alongside it. She lifted the door to uncover the six-by-three-foot hole she and her sister had dug there last October before the ground froze. Maudie manhandled the body over to the edge, eased the legs in at one end, and as best she could, she lowered the rest of the body so that her sister's corpse lay on its back. Taking off her jacket, she knelt down on the lip of the grave and spread it across the body like a coverlet, tucking the collar up under Sal's gray chin.

Maudie remained there on her knees for a moment. Sal had always insisted no prayer be said over her body. Still, a prayer did seem in order, so Maudie offered up one for her own soul. Then she took off her bloody gardening gloves, tossed them into the grave, and got to her feet. She went into the garage and, one at a time she lugged out the black plastic bags half filled with dirt. When she'd emptied their contents back into the hole she got the pitchfork and moved the compost heap to cover the fresh dirt. Then she carried the old door back inside the garage where they'd found it.

Maudie walked up to the house and called the police. "Dear," she told the woman who took her call, "this is Miss Maude McCurdy at Fifteen Pine Street." Then she repeated the speech she and her sister had worked out together for the survivor to use. "I'm very worried. It's about my sister. You see, she went out for her walk two hours ago and she isn't back yet. She gets forgetful sometimes, and I'm afraid she might have wandered off into the woods."

Maudie hung up the phone and went over to the kitchen table. In the drawer there were two photographs, one of herself, the other of her sister. She took out Sal's picture, set it down on the table, and closed the drawer. They knew the police would want a recent photograph. She remembered the time they'd spent last October going through the photo box and smiling at each other and their shared secret as they made their choices. Who would she have to smile at and share a secret with now?

The roof of Maudie's mouth ached. But she fought back the tears. There were still things to do. She had to go upstairs and wash and change her clothes. There would be plenty of time for crying after the police had come and gone. ●

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DOUBLE OR NOTHING

by Katherine H. Brooks

Two bodies lay, with fractured bones
And noggins split asunder—
Two broken backs across the tracks.
The cops could only wonder,
Since not a single clue was there
To who or what or why,
Or how they met their Waterloo.
Who pushed them off to die?
The victims of this crime were twins,
Alike in dress and feature,
With one a sweet and gentle man—
A boon to fellow creature;
The other brother brash and mean,
As changeable as weather,
But though they never got along,
They seemed to stick together.

One day, while strolling on a bridge
That spanned a busy station,
The conversation turned to shouts
Of wild vituperation
Delivered by the *evil* twin,
And when his rage was spent,
He fixed his brother with a grin
Of murderous intent;
And as the victim stopped to watch
A train, and turned his back,
He hoisted him above the edge,
And hurled him towards the track.
While doing so, he felt a surge
Of unexpected terror,
And clutched the wall, to break his fall,
Too late to mend his error.

Moral:
The wretched fellow made, you see,
Atonement for his sins,
By foolishly forgetting he
Was one of Siamese twins.

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Art by Laurie Harden

FEMME FATALE

by Peter Turnbull

TUESDAY—23:30

John Black saw the dark heap by the roadside half on the pavement, half in the gutter. It unnerved him. Even at a distance of about three hundred yards, he guessed, it unnerved him. He knew intuitively that his walk home on this pleasant summer's night, here in well-set Bearsden, was going to be cut short by unpleasantness. Here among the ancient tribe of Volvo and Mercedes and Jaguar, here, basking in the soft yellow glow of the sodium lamps, here was tragedy. He quickened his pace. A car passed him, moving in his direction; the headlights picked up the mound in the gutter; the car slowed and then sped away. Human nature often dismayed John Black. He kept his eyes on the mound, which as he approached revealed itself to be of human form, then a male, an adult, lying in a crumpled heap against the kerb stones. He knelt

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by the man, a youngish man, he noted, well dressed, his head lolling to one side: no evident injury, not drunk, no smell of alcohol at least. John Black felt for a pulse; it eluded him. He placed his hand inside the man's light summer raincoat and felt something warm and wet and sticky. He stood, looked for a phone box. Seeing one, he ran to it and dialled three nines, smearing the man's blood liberally about the handset as he did so.

Later, in the comfortable, reassuring lapping of the blue lights of Papa Tango Foxtrot, he answered PC Hamilton's questions as carefully as he could, occasionally, and anxiously, glancing at the paramedics as they gently lifted the body onto a stretcher and eased it into the back of an ambulance. Occasionally a passing car would slow as it passed, a pedestrian would pause before moving reverently on his way, because this was Bearsden. In the East End schemes, or neighbouring "needle city" Drumchapel, the crowds would gather at such a spectacle, ogling as people once ogled at public executions.

"You didn't see anything suspicious?" Hamilton asked.

"No. Nothing. Just a mound in the road. I saw it as I turned into this road from Roman Road. I saw him as soon as I turned the corner. I got close, saw what it was, checked for a pulse, but I didn't move him in case he was a hit-and-run victim. I'm a paramedic."

"Useful."

"Aye. I work at Lightburn Hospital, elderly terminally ill, but I know how to check for a pulse. I couldn't feel one, but his body was warm."

"It was warm," Hamilton noted in his pad.

"Then I felt the blood on his chest and then I dialled three nines."

An ambulance crewman closed one of the rear doors and climbed

Peter Turnbull's police P Division is back in a procedural packed with a fascinating array of Glaswegian characters. In reviewing the author's last-published novel, *The Killing Floor* (St. Martin's Press), *Publishers Weekly* praised Mr. Turnbull's incisive characterization of even minor figures. He brings the same concern for realistic rendering of all his characters to his short fiction. ¶

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in the back of the vehicle. The other crewman closed the second door and then ran to the cab. He turned the vehicle in a 180-degree turn and drove towards Glasgow, with klaxon, blue lights, police escort.

"They must think they've got a chance." Black watched the ambulance turn. "They probably found a pulse. Not the sort of thing you'd expect to happen in Bearsden."

"What isn't?"

"This isn't." Black pointed to the place where the man had lain.

"Do you know what happened, Mr. Black?"

"No. Just as I told you, but blood on his chest, he's not been hit and run, he's been knifed. . . ."

"We'll wait for the medics to tell us that, Mr. Black, but let me tell you that sort of thing happens anywhere."

"Aye." John Black nodded. "I suppose it does." He shivered; the warm evening no longer felt warm.

Richard King sat hunched over the file on his desk, writing up his case notes. He glanced sideways at his image reflected in the glass of the office window, a full-cheeked, bearded young man, a full head of black hair. Beyond his image he could see the graceful curve of Charing Cross Mansions, lit up at night, as always, and beneath the building, the headlights of the cars as they swept by. He returned his attention to the case file. He wanted a quiet shift. He had a case load to get up to date; all recording to be done, all documents properly filed in the correct places. The six-monthly caseload inspection was due to take place on Friday. He glanced at his watch, ten after midnight, Wednesday already. Richard King wanted a quiet shift more than he had wanted a quiet shift for an awfully long time.

Then his phone rang.

He knew it was bad news. As soon as it started to ring he knew that he was in for a busy shift. He picked up the phone. "DC King."

"Control, sir."

"Yes?"

"We've just received a radio message from PC Hamilton. He attended an incident in Bearsden."

"Yes?"

"He's at the A and E department of the Western Infirmary. The victim was coded condition purple on admission, died en route to

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the hospital. The death is deemed suspicious and the CID are requested. It's a possible murder."

"Code forty-one," sighed King. "That's all I need. All right, get back to Hamilton, let him know that I'm on my way." King stood, replaced the file in his cabinet, signed out of the building, and drove from Charing Cross to the Western Infirmary along Dumbarton Road. The night was at its darkest, he mused; be getting light at about three A.M. He enjoyed Scottish summers, brief as they are.

He drove up the ramp towards the Accident and Emergency department of the Western Infirmary and parked the car in the Ambulances Only bay. This, he found, was the way of it at night; it was one of the few aspects of working the graveyard shift that appealed to him. At night, rules were relaxed—during the day he would have been chased out of the Ambulance Only parking bay by a petty tyrant in a peaked cap, but such people are no night hawks. At night the rule seemed to be companionship amongst the night workers, no matter what job you did. And since there was always plenty of space in the Ambulance Only parking bay at night because the vehicles which ferried the out patients to and from their appointments were all in the garage, King parked there with impunity. He walked across the tarmac towards the electronically operated doors of the A and E department. A nightingale sang as he did so. PC Hamilton stood by the reception desk, grim-faced.

"He didn't make it, I understand?" King said as he approached. Hamilton shook his head. "Died in the ambulance. I've had a wee word with the ambulance crew; they couldn't say for certain, in fact, if he wasn't dead when they picked him out of the gutter, but he was still warm, so they had to proceed on the assumption that he was alive. He was pronounced dead on arrival by the junior houseman."

"Any ID?"

"His wallet, it gives his name as . . ." Hamilton consulted his note pad, ". . . Jack Cunningham, has an address in Mount Florida. Lochleven Road, Mount Florida."

"So what was he doing in Bearsden?" King pondered aloud. "He lives south of the water; he was found in a gutter in a posh area north of the water."

"No reason why he shouldn't go for a wander."

"No reason at all. Can I leave the ID to you, please?"

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"I'm glad it's not like that," said the woman, pale-faced, tear tracks over ashen skin, under silver hair. She sat in the anteroom of the mortuary of the Western, a cold, hard room which had been softened a little by purple velvet covers on the benches which ran along the wall. "In the films, ye ken, they pull them out of drawers."

"No." Hamilton shook his head. "It's not like that."

"Looking at him through a window, it looked as if he was floating so peacefully . . ."

"Mrs. Cunningham . . . ?"

"Aye." The woman nodded. "That's my son Jack. Named after his father."

"Thank you." Hamilton wrote on his pad.

"It's like it's not real," said the woman. "Who'd do this to my wee Jack, my wean . . . murder . . . ?"

"We don't know that it's murder yet." Hamilton spoke softly. "All we can say at the moment is that he has what appear to be knife wounds to the chest."

"Well, he didn't do that to himself. Oh, who'd do that to my son? He was to be married, he had a good job, an accountant, he'd got the world to live for. See, me, son, I only ever had the one wean and when his father died, my Jack, there was just me and him." The woman began to weep. "You couldn't wish for a better son, so kind, so helpful, so he was. He would have left me to get married, but that's the only reason. Mind, I'd want him to leave for that reason. It was the right time to, he was twenty-seven. Time to leave home."

"Who was his fiancée, Mrs. Cunningham?"

"Aye, she's a girl called Sally Aushenbaucher. I don't really care for her. She was nice, she's pretty, but she's a wee bit flighty for my Jack, I always thought. I wanted him to find a more sensible lassie but he was besotted with her, so he was. She's an address in Partick, no really a stone's throw from here. Her real name's Sarah. See, that's her, she'd no be a daughter of mine, a beautiful name like Sarah and she gives herself a daft wee pet name like Sally, like she was some pet rabbit. She is a daft wee wean to my way of thinking, but like I said, Jack was determined. She is a good-looking girl, but I couldn't see anything behind the smile. Never worked, you know, never had a job."

"What's her address, Mrs. Cunningham?"

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"You don't think . . . ?"

"We don't think anything at this stage, Mrs. Cunningham."

"No . . . I suppose . . . One Thirty-six Mansfield Street, I don't mind which door on the stair, but it's One Thirty-six Mansfield Street, house of Aushenbaucher."

"Thank you, Mrs. Cunningham. We'll run you home."

Reynolds extended his arm and caught the phone on the second purr. He pulled the handset under the duvet cover and listened. Then he said, "Reynolds here . . . yes, yes . . . right. I'm on my way." He replaced the receiver and slid out from under the duvet. He glanced at the softly glowing display on the radio alarm: 01:35. Early, he thought, preferable to the calls at three and four A.M. He took clean clothing from the drawers and wardrobe, moving silently so as not to wake his wife, who lay still and silent on her side of the bed. Carrying his clothing he crept out of the room and dressed in the bathroom. He went downstairs and let Gustav the St. Bernard into the rear garden while he made himself a cup of instant coffee and a bacon sandwich. He never left the house without something in his stomach and made sure that his family didn't either. It was one of the few carved-in-stone rules that he insisted on. With Gustav back inside the house, and with himself feeling warmed and refreshed by the coffee and sandwich, he left his house and reversed his silver Volvo estate down the gravel-covered drive, slowly, steadily, as soft as he could, minimising the sound of the wide tyres crunching the stones. The gravel was another carved-in-stone rule that he had insisted on; there's nothing like gravel to stop bandits creeping around your house in the wee small hours. Gravel and a St. Bernard ensured his family slept safely at nights.

Janet Reynolds lay still and listened as her husband drove his car down the drive, listened as it climbed through the gears as it was driven away from her villa in Glasgow's leafy and prestigious Pollokshields and towards the city centre. She had, despite her husband's determined sensitivity and thoughtfulness, woken the instant the phone rang. She suffered from insomnia, and knew that she now wouldn't sleep. For many years she had been distressed by her condition and had tried to knock herself out with drink and drugs for eight hours each twenty-four. Eventually it had occurred to her that her insomnia was a blessing, a privilege, a gift from God. She reasoned that if her body didn't need it, simple

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as that, it meant that she had six extra hours to herself that others didn't have. She had used the extra time to study, in the first instance; had reached university where she had met her husband, her wonderful, wonderful husband. Now she used it to consume endless novels, study foreign languages, or just have a few hours of uninterrupted peace, space for herself before her children began clamouring for attention. As soon as she knew that her husband was safely round the first corner, she switched on the bedside light and slipped into a housecoat and went downstairs. She percolated a pot of coffee and carried it into the living room where she curled up with an historical romance. Heaven.

Reynolds drew the circular saw downwards over the breastbone, exposing the chest cavity, exposing the heart. He turned and nodded to King. "Yes, Mr. King, it is as I thought, it's a case of fatal knife wounding. Two, three deep, penetrating wounds to the chest angling upwards, and a fourth, fatal wound which penetrated the aorta. Death would have been instantaneous, but not before the deceased knew terror, caused by the first three wounds. Now, I confess I find the angling of the blade to be interesting. The wounds drive upwards at an angle of forty-five degrees under the rib cage; it is as if the murderer knew what he was doing, aiming up, under the rib cage, seeking out the heart with his blade. That's how it's done—with an amateur, or a frenzied partner, it's usually an attack directly against the rib cage."

"But this attacker knew what he was doing?"

"Yes." Reynolds studied the corpse on the stainless-steel table. "Yes. One single knife wound to the aorta might be luck or ill luck, depending on your point of view, but four, all at a similar angle, grouped in the same location . . . no, this is the work of a man who, as you say, knew what he was doing. The man who did this has been trained in the grim art of taking human life." Reynolds paused. "I think that I can detect a slight tendency for the wounds to run from bottom right to top left, as seen from the anterior aspect. It might, but only might, indicate a right-handed perpetrator."

"Every little bit helps, sir." King watched as Reynolds turned his attention to the fingernails of the deceased.

"Ah ... ." he said. "Here." He took a scraping from under the nail of the middle finger of the right hand. "Here the deceased has left you a present, Mr. King."

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"He has?"

"He has. In the form of a hair, red. The perpetrator had red hair. I'll let you know if this hair is from a human scalp or a beard. If it is from a beard, you'll know the perpetrator is a male. If so, that'll fit neatly with the knowledge displayed by the use of the knife. What I mean is that that sort of knowledge is more likely to be held by a man rather than by a woman, but again I emphasise only more likely—but that's more your department than mine." He placed the small fragment of hair in a test tube and sealed the top. "I notice grazing on the head and hands, indicating a scuffle, possibly in soil, or the street, rather than in the home. There appear to be vegetation stains to the head and soil deposits in the hair."

"He was found at the side of the road, sir."

"Really? . . . He could have been pushed from a car. That would be consistent with these grazings. Now the perpetrator would have blood about his clothing. If the deceased was pushed from a car, then there would be blood in the car as well."

"I see, sir."

"Young man," mused Reynolds, considering the body. "Not at all bad-looking, appears healthy, he was clean-living, no indication of alcohol or tobacco overusage, good teeth, neat hair, sedentary occupation, office worker—doesn't have the grime about him that a manual worker would have. . . . He appears to have had much to live for."

"Everything," King said. "He was engaged to be married."

"Really?" Reynolds sighed. "Well, some poor lassie will be crying herself raw in a few hours' time. I'll have my report typed up and faxed to you ASAP. It'll be midmorning. Noreen starts her working day at nine A.M., but she invariably spends the first half of the morning pouring hot black stuff down her neck to compensate for all the colourless stuff she pours down her neck each evening. So you may expect my report by about eleven A.M."

"Very good, sir."

Sally Aushenbaucher woke as the sun crept into her bedroom and she lay there basking as the sunlight flooded her room, so that by 7:30 A.M. her bedroom was fully and brilliantly illuminated by natural light. She rose slowly, sensually, because she liked her body. She stood in front of the angled mirrors soaking in the beauty of her being from every angle, from the front, the sides,

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and the rear. She liked her long legs, she liked her pert bottom, she liked her trim waist, she liked her breasts, she liked her face, she liked her long golden hair. All the parts of her body were perfect, and all the parts were in proportion to each other. Life was good. She glided across the carpet and sat at her dressing table. On one side of the dressing table was a framed photograph of Jack Cunningham on which was written "To Sally with all my love, Jack." On the other side of the dressing table was a photograph of Shane Short on which was written "To Sally with all my love, Shane." Sometimes she adjusted the photographs so that Jack and Shane looked at each other as she sat between them applying her makeup, which she knew she didn't really need. But most of the time they were angled towards her, like her mirrors, so that she was gazed upon from different directions.

Fabian Donoghue sat in his chair and reached for his pipe. "So what happened in the night, Montgomerie?" He began to fill his pipe, holding it and scooping the tobacco using one hand, in a practised manner.

"Well, sir." Montgomerie shifted his position in his chair. He was twenty-seven years old, chiselled features, downturned moustache. "Richard King didn't hand much over at six A.M., a burglary, aggravated . . ."

"Aggravated?" Donoghue flicked his gold-plated cigarette lighter and played the flame over the bowl of his pipe.

"Aye, sir. Three youths, waded into an elderly couple's house with an imitation pistol. It looked real to the victims, who are now in a state of shock. We've got good witness statements, no prints, though, they wore gloves. . . ."

"Television teaches them something then?"

"Indeed, sir, but Richard thinks the operation has all the hallmarks of a ned that's known to him, so we'll be pulling him for a quizzing."

"All right, you'll be getting on with that, I take it?"

"Yes, sir, but I really want to draw your attention to this." Montgomerie handed Donoghue a file. "It's a code forty-one."

"Oh. Murder most foul."

"Indeed, sir. The victim is a young man by the name of Cunningham. . . ."

"Tell me about it."

So Montgomerie told him about it.

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"I see." Donoghue pulled lovingly on his pipe. "That does take precedence over the aggravated burglary. What are you going to do, do you think?"

"Well, sir, I've chatted to Richard King, we both felt that we should look at the deceased's living circumstances. He still lived with his mother, but he would have had a room of his own. Might be something there. His murder seems to be more than just a brawl that got out of hand."

"What do you know about his fiancée?"

Montgomerie shook his head. "Not a thing as yet, sir."

"As you say, a chartered accountant doesn't get involved in street brawls, especially if he's soon to be married. Speak to his lady friend, she might be able to tell you of enemies without number. His place of work also might be harbouring a knifeman who had a score to settle."

Montgomerie stood. "I'll get onto it immediately, sir. The rest of the night shift was small beer by comparison." He glanced out of Donoghue's office window, along the length of Sauchiehall Street, the mixtured buildings, the old, the new, the vehicles, the pedestrians, windows glinting in the sun. "Dr. Reynolds's report may be expected at eleven or thereabouts."

"Very good. Leave the other files too, please, I'll read them now."

Montgomerie and Constable Wanless called on Mrs. Cunningham, mother of the deceased. She had returned to her sandstone tenement in Mount Florida, and was being comforted by relatives. No, she had no idea who would want to murder her son, no, she had no objection to the police looking in her son's bedroom, second on the left.

Jack Cunningham's room was neatly kept, almost to the point of fastidiousness. It was decorated with gentle pastel shades, which contrasted effectively with the solid, sensible furniture. On Jack Cunningham's desk was a photograph of a young woman, fetching in open-neck shirt and jeans, on which was written "To Jack with all my love, Sally."

"His lady friend?" asked Wanless.

"They were to be married, or so Mrs. Cunningham told Hamilton in the night after she identified his body. She lives in Partick, I've a note of her address. I'm a bit surprised she's not here; you would have thought she'd have come round."

"You'd've thought so, if they were that close. Hang about, what's

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this?" Wanless picked up Cunningham's desk diary. "Look at the entry for yesterday."

Montgomerie did so. It read "S.S. at the Bear and Billet, 9:00 P.M."

"The Bear and Billet?" Wanless asked.

"It's a pub. In Bearsden. Right, I think we take a wee wander out to the Bear and Billet, see if anybody, like the landlord, remembers Mr. Cunningham speaking with somebody there about two or three hours before he was murdered. We need a photograph of the deceased."

"This'll do, I think." Wanless took a second framed photograph from the desk. It showed Jack Cunningham in happier times, arms around a girl who was clearly Sally.

"It'll do. We'll ask if we can take it with us."

Montgomerie took the wheel and drove the unmarked police car out of the sandstone tenements of Mount Florida, over the Kingston Bridge, through central Glasgow, and out to suburban Bearsden. As they drove along Great Western Road, they were called on the radio. Wanless reached forward and pressed the Send button. "Receiving."

"Control to Papa Sierra November, message from DI Donoghue reference Cunningham murder. Hair under the fingernail of the deceased believed to come from the perpetrator has been identified as being a beard hair, red in colour. For your information. Control Out."

Wanless replaced the microphone. "So the perpetrator is a red-haired, bearded guy."

"Looks that way." Montgomerie turned up Bearsden Road at the Anniesland junction.

"They can tell a beard hair from a scalp hair? Didn't know that."

"Simple," said Montgomerie as he overtook a blue and yellow Kelvin Scottish double-decker. "Beard hair is triangular in cross section, scalp hair is circular, pubic hair is oval. They're very easy to tell apart under a microscope. So our perp has a red beard. Narrows the field nicely."

Montgomerie turned into the forecourt of the Bear and Billet. Only one other car, a yellow Nissan, stood in the car park. He and Wanless left their car and walked towards the low-roofed, long and thin building that was the Bear and Billet, licensed to sell alcohol since 1642, according to a blue plaque on the wall by the wooden door. Inside, a woman in overalls vacuumed the carpet;

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flecks of dust floated in the air, caught in the shafts of sunlight which streamed in through the windows.

"Not open yet," she said, almost shouting, as Montgomerie and Wanless entered. Then, noticing Wanless's uniform, she said, "Oh." Then she turned and yelled, "Mr. Pike," into the gloom.

"What now?" came the answering yell.

"Polis," yelled the cleaning lady. Then she recommenced the cleaning.

Montgomerie and Wanless heard a shuffling of furniture above the din of the vacuum cleaner and a well-built man, casually dressed, walked out of the gloom. He looked questioningly at Montgomerie and Wanless. "Aye?" he said apprehensively.

Montgomerie showed his ID and said it was nothing to worry about, he said they were looking for information. Pike immediately relaxed; so obvious was Pike's apprehension and relaxation that Montgomerie could only wonder what the man had on his conscience. But he asked if Pike was serving last night.

"Aye." Pike nodded. "But there was nay bother, I don't get bother in here, not like in my last pub. People who drink here are professional types, mostly."

"Busy?"

"Busy enough. But it was Tuesday, always the quietest night of the week."

"I wonder." Montgomerie took the photograph of Jack Cunningham with Sally from his jacket pocket and showed it to Pike. "Could you tell us if the man in this photograph was in the pub last night?"

Pike studied the photograph. "Nice-looking lassie," he said.

"The guy, Mr. Pike. It's the guy we're interested in."

"Och aye . . . aye . . . the guy . . . aye, aye, he was in." Pike nodded. "See, I mind him because he was so different from his mate. . . . Sat at that table there. I couldn't see what they saw in each other, so I thought they must be talking business. They talked, what's the word, intense, that's it, real intense talk they had. See, him, small neat guy, didn't drink too much, but his mate, great bear of a man with red hair and a beard, Jeso, talk about Red Fergus of Glen Orchy, drank like a sailor."

"Red beard?"

"Aye. She's a bonnie lassie, though, eh?"

"Seen him before?"

"The guy . . . no, no I haven't, not the wee guy, but Red Fergus

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comes in from time to time, not often enough to be called a regular. But you notice him, red hair and cold blue eyes."

"Did they leave together?"

"No." Pike shook his head. "No . . . the bear left first, he looked angry, so he did, stormed out, didn't cause a scene but he left the wee guy sitting there looking pleased with himself, so he did. See, while you're here, there's a car been left in my car park, can you tell me whose it is? I mean you've got all they details on computer."

Wanless said, "Sorry, sir, we can't do that."

But Montgomerie said, "You mean the yellow Nissan?"

"Knew you'd help." Pike smiled.

Outside, in the sun, walking towards the Nissan, Montgomerie said, "It's a long shot, a very long shot, but they've paid off before."

The yellow Nissan stood in the corner of the car park beside lavender shrubbery. Montgomerie said, "Don't get too close." They halted. "Can you radio in the registration number?" Wanless did so and held the channel open. A few seconds later Control replied that the registration number was that of a yellow Nissan, registered to a Jack Cunningham of Lochleven Road, Mount Florida.

"Well done, you," said Wanless to Montgomerie.

"Cop's intuition," Montgomerie replied. "Let's take a closer look, but don't touch."

They approached the car. "Here." Montgomerie pointed to the concrete beneath the driver's door. "Here be blood."

Wanless looked at the dark stains on the concrete. "They lead to the shrubs," he said.

"Don't they just." Montgomerie stepped towards the shrubs and peeled a branch back. He noted signs of a recent disturbance, broken saplings, crushed vegetation, footprints in the soil. Blood on the leaves. He stepped back. "Better get onto Control. This is the scene of Jack Cunningham's murder. Can see it, can't you? Redbearded guy left before Cunningham, waited by Cunningham's car, dragged him into the shrubs, did the business, bundled the body into his own car, and dumped it in a gutter close by."

Wanless nodded. "Aye. I can see it as clear as daylight."

Wanless and Montgomerie remained at the crime scene until Donoghue arrived with a scene of crime officer and six constables and a sergeant who proceeded to cordon off the area with blue and white police tape. Pike stormed out of the pub complaining about

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the parking space he needed until he was snarled at by the uniformed sergeant, at which point he retreated rapidly.

"What do you plan now?" Donoghue pulled on his pipe.

"Visit Jack Cunningham's intended," Montgomerie said. "See if she can identify the bear with the beard."

Donoghue nodded.

"Which one?" said the woman.

Montgomerie's jaw sagged. "What?"

"I said, which one." The woman stood on the threshold of her flat, two up left, 136 Mansfield Street, Partick, G11. "She's got two."

"She can't have two fiancés."

"Sally can. So which one's dead?"

"Cunningham," Montgomerie replied meekly. Deflated. "Jack Cunningham."

"Jack, eh." The woman shook her head. "He's the one I would have liked to have seen her with. Still, now she won't have to agonize about which one to go for, will she?"

"Sorry, you are . . . ?"

"I'm her stepmother."

"I see. Is Sally in?"

"No, no, she's away into the town, buying clothes again, I expect."

"Can we come inside?" Montgomerie asked. "This is a confidential matter, just the sort of thing your neighbours will love."

"Aye, so they will, on this stair they will."

Sally Aushenbaucher and her stepmother's home was clean, delicate, neat, fragrant, predominantly pink, with a dash of white here and there. Montgomerie "read" the room. No man had lived here for many years.

"Aye." Mrs. Aushenbaucher reclined in a chair. "Please take a seat." Montgomerie and Wanless did so. "Aye, see, when I married her father, she was ten, so she was. This is my house now, bought and paid, my man's been away this seven years. He left me the house on the condition that Sally be allowed to live in it until she married, and he left her enough money to survive without working until she was married. So she never worked. She's a daft girl. She wouldn't be daft if she was mine, but at ten her personality was formed. All 'me, me, me, me' . . . aye, she's no daughter of mine, I can tell you. But I agreed to her living here because she's

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attractive and I knew it wouldn't be long before she was away, but I didn't expect her to have two fiancés."

"How can she?" Montgomerie asked. "I mean, you can't wear two engagement rings—what did she do, wear one or the other depending on who she was spending time with?"

"It wasn't like that, see she wasn't *engaged* engaged, if you see what I mean, she was just, well, sort of engaged."

"Sorry, Mrs. Aushenbaucher." Montgomerie smiled and shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Well, she'd got to that stage with both of them, considering themselves engaged, but still to make the announcement, buy the ring, have a party. But she couldn't decide which one to go with and which one to break if off with. See, Jack was an accountant, she was fond of him and he offered safety, won't ever be hungry as an accountant's wife, but she thought he was dull. The other was a guy called Shane Short." Mrs. Aushenbaucher grimaced. "I didn't care for him, but Sally thought he was exciting. He's an ex-marine, built like an ox, fiery red beard and a temper to match his name. Can't keep a job, but the lassie's go for him. Sally said she wished she could put them both in a pot and melt them into one person, get the best of both. The daft lassie, she's got photographs of both guys on her dressing table, one at each side, as if looking at her."

"Do you have a photograph of Shane Short?"

"Plenty. He loved his image. I'll let you have one. Anyway, both guys kept pressing Sally for a date to announce the engagement, so she solved the problem by telling them about each other. She thought they could work something out, help her make a decision. The daft lassie."

Montgomerie groaned. "Do you know Shane Short's address?"

"Aye." Mrs. Aushenbaucher reached for her handbag. "It's in my wee book, here in my bag."

After she thought that a decent time had elapsed since Jack's death and Shane's arrest, a little over a week she thought fitting, Sally Aushenbaucher dressed in her most fetching outfit and went to a nightclub. Alone. She was looking for a man. She knew it wouldn't be difficult. Men pure killed for her. So they did. ●

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KADDISH

by Batya Swift Yasgur

"Why me?"

"A nice Jewish question," MacAllister answered. "Why you? Because you're of their faith, that's why."

"But I haven't been a practicing Jew for years—"

MacAllister shrugged. "Jews will probably open up more to another Jew than to an outsider." He smiled his toothy smile and clapped me on the shoulder. "Go on, Schwartz. Here's the file. Find out who murdered the rabbi."

But you don't understand, I wanted to shout at his fleshy back as it retreated from my little cubicle. I'm worse than an outsider. Worse than a *goy*. I'm an *apikores*, an apostate, my own parents won't have me in the house. You don't understand, MacAllister. I don't want to prowl around the study of some dead rabbi any more than I want to sit at the feet of some living rabbi. Can't I slosh through the mud and investigate that body that washed up on the banks of the Hudson last week? Or risk my neck in Harlem dredging up information on that missing baby? I'd gladly take a gunshot or two, but keep me away from ghosts with *yarmulkes*, keep me away from the shadowy echoes of Hebrew prayers and Talmudic chants.

But there's no arguing with MacAllister once he's made up his mind, once his red face creases into its smug folds, once he thinks he knows. You do as you're told, like a child in religious school.

Since she last appeared in *EQMM* Batya Swift Yasgur has sold short fiction to several other magazines. In collaboration with her agent and colleague Barry Malzberg, she authored stories this year for *Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Realms of Fantasy*, as well as producing a story recently published in *Science Fiction Age*. Her new piece for *EQMM* concerns a police detective with an interesting moral dilemma.

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So here I was, uncomfortably edging my way into the *shivah,* the room where the mourners, family of the deceased Rabbi Weissman, were receiving guests to comfort them.

A hushed room, covered mirrors, a buxom woman in a formless dress, torn at the collar in memory of the dead, her head modestly draped in a scarf, dabbing red eyes. The rebbetzin, I guessed. Mrs. Weissman. Two young men, Rabbi Weissman's sons, on either side, one with earlocks and a Hebrew book open on his lap, the other looking more modern, with *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning* in his hand. A bevy of people, men with *yarmulkes,* women with wigs or scarves, long skirts, long sleeves. Murmured snatches reached my ears: "Yes, he was a *tzaddik,* a holy man . . ." "To think, such a tragedy!" "A murder—in our community—what next—"

I elbowed my way gingerly to the front. Conversation ceased, as a dozen Orthodox eyes turned to look at me. A stranger in their midst. A stranger who should belong.

"Rebbetzin Weissman? I'm sorry to intrude, I know what a difficult time this is for you, but I need to ask you some questions. I'm Jack Schwartz." I displayed my badge.

"Oy, more questions?" She turned her red eyes toward me. "I thought I'd answered them already and *genug schoin,* enough, let me be."

I shrugged, feeling worse than ever. "I'm sorry, really, but I've been assigned to the case, and I always ascertain the facts for myself." (Indeed, that had been my undoing in the religion: take nobody's word for things, not the rabbis, not the Talmud, and trust nothing that I haven't experienced. A bad idea for a religion which relies upon the testimony of others.) I glanced at all the open-mouthed visitors, glaring at me. "Is there someplace where we can talk privately?"

Of course not, I realized. Stupid of me. No Orthodox woman would converse alone in a room with a man. I was about to apologize yet again when, as if on cue, the guests all rose, muttered the obligatory Hebrew words of consolation—"May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem"—and filed out, leaving Rebbetzin Weissman and her two sons.

An awkward silence, punctuated by sobs. I opened with the usual questions.

"Where was your husband when he was killed?"

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"In his study at the *shul*—at the synagogue," she translated for my benefit.

"Why was he there?"

She shrugged, a look of disbelief on her face. (You mean you don't know? What kind of detective—and worse, what kind of Jew—are you anyway? it said.) "He always saw congregants in his study. They came to him in droves, especially at night. After evening services and his evening Talmud class. He rarely came home before ten o'clock at night. I always said to him—Levi, you work too hard. You should take better care of yourself. But he was such a devoted man, always doing *chesed,* acts of kindness and charity. He always put the congregation before himself." And she began to cry again.

"Mama, don't," said the earlocked son, handing her a tissue.

"Father was like that," said the second son, the modern one. "And such an exponent of the faith! I wasn't always religious—I strayed away from the Torah—but he brought me back with his love."

I didn't want to hear this, the eulogies, the paroxysm of posthumous worship. "So who came to see him that night?"

"I don't know. Levi never talked about who came with *shailos*—you know, religious questions—or for counseling. It was personal."

"But he had a diary," Modern Son added quickly. "You should find it in the top right-hand corner of his desk."

I wrote that down. "Any enemies?"

The three began talking at once, a hubbub of denials. I held my hand up.

"No one, especially a rabbi, is universally loved. Come on, tell me the truth."

Exchanges of glances, a few "hmm"s and "er"s. Then a big sigh from the rebbetzin. "All right, yes, there were a few. But you can't seriously suspect someone within the *shul?* Surely it was an outsider, maybe a hit-and-run driver who shot him through the window of the study as he drove by on the street, maybe some anti-Semite, a neo-Nazi, there's a whole bunch of them in the next town over—"

"We're investigating all that. A neighbor thought she might have heard a car, we're looking into that, but we can't rule anything out."

"Even other Jews—I can't believe that, that another Jew would—"

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The familiar irritation rose to the surface like a rash. "Jews aren't immune. They're—we're—as prone to pettiness and crime as anyone else." My voice was sharp; I realized I'd have to tone it down or these people would never open up and trust me. "Just tell me—please. Was there anyone in the *shul* who disliked your husband?"

"Well. There were a few people who made *tsuris* for him, tried to block his contract renewal. Reuben and Rachel Glassner. They've hated my husband because he didn't visit Reuben's father in the hospital. He couldn't help it," she burst out, "nobody told him old Mr. Glassner was sick till it was too late—but they won't believe that. And Simon Siden, he thinks my husband's sermons were too long." A pause, the rebbetzin's knuckles pressed to her eyes. "Oh, and Judah Mackler. He thought my husband's religious rulings were too lenient. Oy, was he angry that my husband allowed KosherTaste Caterers to cater in our *shul,* because there was that scandal about rabbinic supervision there a few years ago, and lots of Orthodox Jews won't eat their food."

I scribbled busily. "Anyone else?"

Another pause, more glances exchanged, more sighs. "No, but—you'll check the neo-Nazis? My husband, he was a Holocaust survivor."

"I'll check everything."

The rebbetzin nodded, grasped her sons' hands.

"Anything else you can tell me?"

She shook her head, her eyes welling again.

"Anything about your husband? How did he spend his time? Did he have any hobbies, involvements, something which could help me to—"

The babble of praise broke out. Hospital visits, charitable acts, hours spent over Talmudic tomes. "He loved to read mysteries," the modern son mentioned diffidently.

"Ssh." It was a sort of hiss from the earlocked son. "It doesn't honor our father's memory to have people know that."

I swallowed the bile that had risen bitterly to my throat. "What kind of mysteries?"

"Sherlock Holmes," the young man said, glancing apologetically at his brother. "Whenever Father wanted to relax, he used to read Sherlock Holmes. He had a copy here, and one in his study at *shul.*"

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Thank God. It made the late unfortunate Rabbi Levi Weissman a bissel more human.

I put my notebook away and turned to leave. "I'll let you know as soon as I find anything out."

"Wait." It was the rebbetzin, holding out a tremulous hand which she almost put on my arm, then remembering the religious restriction against touching men, she dropped it. "You are Jewish, aren't you?"

I nodded, a lump suddenly blocking my throat.

"Orthodox?"

"No, I'm not Orthodox." I managed to get the words past the lump.

She shook her head. "My husband would have fixed that. If you had met him—"

Fixed that. Fixed me. I muttered something—*not* the prayer of comfort and consolation—and fled.

Interviews, interviews, establishing alibis. Nothing. The Glassners had been at a bar mitzvah (plenty of witnesses), Simon Siden had been resting in bed, his wife shrilly and indignantly protested, Judah Mackler had traveled to New York to attend a Talmud class. (He wouldn't set foot in Rabbi Weissman's, he informed me, enunciating every syllable as if I were an infant or mentally retarded, because the rabbi was far too lenient in his religious rulings, and so even his Talmudic scholarship couldn't be trusted.) The synagogue's neighbor mentioned something about a car, but couldn't be sure. She'd heard the gunshot and called the police, but was it really a car she'd heard first? It had been so late at night, and she had been so deeply asleep, and her boiler often made noises that sounded like an engine—

All blank. The study had better hold more promise.

And so, timid and trembling, I pushed open the door to Rabbi Weissman's study.

And found myself, after years of running, face-to-face with the angels and demons of my childhood: the volumes of Torah and Talmud, commentaries and sages, titles of gold gleaming seductively and wickedly at me from their maroon covers. *Rashi. Nachmanides. Maimonides. The Code of Jewish Law.* And there, dimpling like an old friend, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes,* as well thumbed as any Talmudic tractate, sitting on the desk.

I nosed around the office, prowled like a caged lion, glancing out

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of the window. The front window looked out onto the street. Sitting at his desk, where he was shot in the head, Rabbi Weissman could have easily been targeted by the hypothetical neo-Nazi in a car. It had been a warm night, the windows were open—

No one could have come through the back window. A small stream ran muddily under the window. Anyone shooting through that window would have had to slosh through the murky water and would have alerted the rabbi to his presence. But the rabbi had been found slumped over his desk, facing *away* from the back window, facing the front. That would be well and good except that the shot was to his left temple. Anyone shooting from the street couldn't have hit his temple unless—

Unless it wasn't someone shooting from the street.

I shook my head. The old dictum of childhood rose, rumbled, warned. "Never suspect another Jew." It would be easy, too easy, to drown the appointment book, to look no further, to gloss the whole thing over and the hell with MacAllister.

But no, there was also a commitment to the truth, to justice. (And more phrases from childhood rose, unbidden: "God's first word is Truth and His Justice is eternal.") Slowly, reluctantly, I opened the desk drawers. And, sure enough, the appointment book was where the young man had said it would be: in the top right-hand desk drawer. Feeling like an intruder, as I always did when going through the personal effects of someone else—living or dead—I opened it to the date of his death.

Appointments: Mrs. Faige Cohen, 9:00, Mr. David Brown, 9:30, Mr. and Mrs. Hyman Nahmanson, 10:00.

A new round of interviews, as I trudged from door to door.

Faige Cohen, a diminutive, white-haired, shriveled-up old lady, had come to see the rabbi regarding a confusion of pots and pans. She had cooked a chicken in her dairy pan, and had her grandchildren coming tomorrow. Was the chicken kosher, since dairy could not be mixed with meat? Could she serve the chicken? Her voice shook as she recounted the rabbi's remarks. "I—I was so upset, you know, since my husband Joseph died, may he rest in peace, I don't have much money, just my little pension, and I didn't know how I would replace a whole chicken. And the rabbi, may he rest in peace, said I should just go ahead and use the chicken." No, she knew no one who could wish him ill, she was home by 9:25, and the bus driver on the number 155 line could identify her if necessary.

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David Brown was a young man, barely out of his teens, a *yarmulke* resting unevenly on a shock of red hair. "It was a weird situation I went to see the rabbi about. A religious question, you know, and I was sure the rabbi would say no, no way." He shook his head and folded his arms. "But he said yes."

"Yes to what?"

"Well, I'm in college, you know. And, like, most professors usually don't schedule exams on Saturdays because of *Shabbos,* the Sabbath. They're usually pretty considerate of the Orthodox students, and they know our rules. See, we don't write on Sabbath, you know."

I nodded. I knew.

"Well, I couldn't get microeconomics rescheduled. A bitch of a professor, she's real nasty and I'm sure she's anti-Semitic. You know. And she had to go and schedule our big final right on Saturday. I couldn't get out of it, I would've failed, you know, and, like, I didn't know what to do. But Rabbi Weissman threw me for a loop. He said yes, I should go take the exam, I could write if I needed to."

To write on Saturday? This was bizarre. To violate Sabbath? The chicken was possible, even though my own training told me that a chicken cooked in dairy utensils was *treif,* unkosher, and had to be discarded. But maybe the rabbi, with his learning and his expertise, knew of some loophole, some leniency that I wasn't aware of. But Sabbath was inviolable, except in life-threatening situations. Something was odd, incongruous. It was with a strange, queasy feeling (not dissimilar to the squishing in my stomach the first time I ate pork) that I proceeded to the Nahmansons.

The door was opened by a thin, bearded, bespectacled young man, obviously in the middle of dinner—(he was still holding his fork, and a napkin was tucked in his pants). A petite, kerchiefed woman peeked out shyly from the kitchen.

Greetings, apologies about the interrupted dinner, then on to business. "Why did you come to see Rabbi Weissman the night of his death?"

A jump, the couple was obviously startled. A glance passed between them, frightened, tremulous. "How did you know? This was a—a very private matter, nobody was supposed to know we came."

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"And nobody did." I tried to make my voice as soothing as possible. "Your names were in his diary, that's how I found out."

The news didn't seem to relieve them. "I'm sorry," said Hyman. "But it's too private to talk about."

"In a murder investigation, I'm afraid nothing can be kept private."

Again the flutter, the frightened glances. "Please believe me when I say that nothing we talked to the rabbi about could have possibly been connected with this horrible tragedy. It was—it was a highly personal matter."

God, how I hated this part of it. The pushing, the prying. "I'm sorry, really I am, but a man is dead, and these are questions I have to ask."

The petite woman burst into tears and ran out of the room.

Hyman glared. "Well, if you must know—" He thrust out his lip belligerently. "We're newlyweds. Married three months ago. Rabbi Weissman performed the ceremony." He paused, licked his lips, his beard trembling. "I—we—I mean, my wife—are you familiar with the Orthodox marriage laws?" Before I could nod, he plunged on. "A man can't touch his wife—make love, even hand her a plate—during her menstrual period, and for seven days afterward. My wife has had something which Jewish law sees as a long period. She just won't stop staining. The doctor says that's normal during times of stress and transition. But it's been hell." His voice broke, he covered his face. "A tease, a miserable tease, to share a room with your new bride, a woman you can't even touch. *Your wife.* We couldn't stand it anymore, we went to Rabbi Weissman hoping there was some leniency he could find. And he studied the holy books and—well, he found a way." A tiny smile creased the tormented face. "Even when she's staining, we can still hug, hold hands, and—" his face reddened and he looked at the floor "—well, you know."

I knew. I knew. I knew the torment, I knew the liberation, and I knew so much more.

I knew before I reentered the study, before I opened the holy books that were strewn across the desk, that the rabbi had consulted (or pretended to consult). I knew before I unearthed my rusty Hebrew, cleaned it and oiled it and used it to delve into those ancient tomes. There was no way, not within Jewish law, that Hyman could be allowed to touch his wife while she was staining. Not during her period. It was a cardinal sin, a violation

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of all the tenets and codes, tantamount to eating on Yom Kippur, and worse, far worse, than eating pork, worse than violating the Sabbath, the penalty for which is death.

The rabbi was cutting corners. No, that was an understatement. Rabbi Weissman had completely dumped Jewish law—at least any law that made life inconvenient, difficult, or painful for its followers.

And, sitting in his chair, I thought I understood. "You do not understand a man until you've stood in his shoes," so say the rabbis. Sitting in Rabbi Weissman's chair was enough.

The stream, the endless stream of sorrows and pleas, the burden of being spokesman for a God of dread and restriction, of rules and penalties, when inside, it was all crumbling, the demon of doubt growing, consuming him, chasing him from pulpit to lectern to podium to sing the praises of the faith in flawless Hebrew and propound its mystery and its wonder. To sing to himself, to that part of himself that held the memory of swastikas and babies' blood, still raw, still screaming from within the void.

Yes, I knew. I knew the demon and I knew its devil's pact: escape. As I had escaped into the world of the *goy,* the non-Jew, into the police force, into the arms of women, and into restaurants that served pork and milk together, and my parents had mourned me as dead—as I had so escaped, so had he. He had taken a more courageous step, mourned as dead because he *was* dead. Dead, I was now sure, by his own hand.

But how? No suicide note, no murder weapon—how could someone shoot himself in the head and conceal the murder weapon with such skill?

The answer lay in this study, it had to. This was his home, his abode, his haven, and his prison. Someplace here, there was a clue, there had to be. I searched again, crawled along the floor, peered in every corner. Nothing.

Desk drawers: nothing. Floor: nothing. Bookshelves: nothing.

I sat down again, moving things around on the desk. If I were Rabbi Weissman, and I was tense, beleaguered, strung out, persecuted, what would I do? Where would I turn? Not to prayer; God had abandoned me, had abandoned six million of my brethren. Not to the holy books; they held nothing but torment.

Then I remembered what the Modern Son had said. Whenever his father needed to relax, he read Sherlock Holmes.

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There was a bookmark in Sherlock Holmes and I opened to the story "The Problem at Thor Bridge."

And there, in the story, was the answer. No suicide note needed. The story was enough. A suicide plan right there, all laid out.

Like the woman in the story, Rabbi Weissman had a gun. Who knows where he got it? It really didn't matter. He had tied a string to the gun, weighed it down with a rock which he hung out of the window. Immediately after shooting, he let go and the gun was whisked out of the window, away, away, into the muddy pond below.

So I went. Schwartz the desanctified Jew who knew exactly what to do, I went there.

And saw the pond yield its muddy evidence, then, as I dragged it, and that terrible testimony surfacing.

The gun, complete with string and rock.

Suicide.

But, oh, the shame and stigma of a suicide in the Orthodox community. The rabbi's grave would have to be dug up so he could be buried outside the cemetery, outside the community, a sign of his sin, that he had disposed of himself, damaged a life and a body not his own but God's. His secret wrenched and paraded before the congregation, the merciless light of truth glaring upon his remains, upon the remains of his widow, his children, upon the ruins of their temple of memory and faith.

But that is not what happened, because it was not what I decided I would tell them.

Instead, this: Let this crime be filed as unsolved (another rabbinic dictum rising to the surface, evidence muddy but unmistakable: "One can alter the truth for the sake of peace."). Let MacAllister grumble, let the rebbetzin mutter about police incompetence, but let the dead remain buried intact, let the living hold on to their illusions.

And so I entered that house of mourning, that *shivah,* again, the mourners flanked by congregants who parted as the waters of the Red Sea to let me through.

"No answers," I told them, the sobbing rebbetzin, the somber sons, the murmuring congregants. "Hit-and-run driver makes the most sense. We'll never know."

She nodded, they all nodded, then shook their heads, a swell of Yiddish and Hebrew and Aramaic growing louder, louder, until

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the earlocked son glanced at his watch. He stood up. *"Mincha!"* he announced. "Time for afternoon prayer."

The women took off like frightened rabbits while the earlocked son did a count. "Seven, eight, nine . . . not enough for a *minyan."* Not enough for a prayer quorum, which requires ten adult men. He turned to me. "Can you be the tenth man?"

Me? *Apikores,* apostate, sinner. Me?

Me, a Jew. Still a Jew, always a Jew.

I took the prayer book, opened it to the correct page, memory casting aside disuse, words ancient and terrible rising, arcing from my throat, words I swore I'd never recite again.

But this was right. Somehow, this was right, to participate in this one last act of prayer. I could do it, I had to do it. A memorial to the dead. Not to the dead rabbi, no, he was beyond memorials, beyond tributes, he was someplace where none of that mattered. No, this was a memorial to his faith, now dead, shattered, dissolved in a blast of gunpowder and blood. A memorial to his faith, that broken vessel of light, its sparks scattered and lost.

And to mine.

Yisgadal v'yiskadash sh'mei rabboh.

May I be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. ●

Crime Without Equity

by Donet Meynell Clayton

There are two murderers in my room,
Day and night waging silent war:
Two illumined hands on a field of time.
I can shut my door against disaster,
I can close my heart against war,
But I can never escape
The tick of their stealthy weapons.
The sins of the silver sword are manifold;
He murders minutes.
But the shorter rogue is the greater villain;
Steady and cautious, with infinite precision
He thrusts his dagger into the full breast of a poignant hour.

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THE DEAD DOG

by Hayford Peirce

"Why would you steal a dog, Opuu?" asked *Commissaire de Police* Alexandre Tama from behind his desk.

"To eat him?" suggested Inspector Opuu, who was as thin and wiry as if he subsisted solely on a diet of lean dog meat. He had dark brown skin like old shoe leather and had been born on one of the many atolls of the Tuamotu Islands, where roast dog has been a standard dinner item since the first Polynesian settlers arrived in their ocean-spanning outrigger canoes far in the unrecorded past.

"Please, Opuu," groaned the Commissaire as he clutched his hands to the enormous expanse of his belly, "the very idea gives me a pain in the *opu.*" His vast girth began to quiver with laughter, for in Tahitian *opu* means stomach. Inspector Opuu's lips twitched sourly: It was a pleasantry he had long ago grown weary of hearing, particularly from his superior officer, who had preten-

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sions of being a gourmet. Inspector Opuu uncharitably considered the Chief of Police an outright glutton, for even on an island of notably stout trenchermen, Alexandre Tama's appetite was legendary.

"I can't believe that *Monsieur le Commissaire* intends to spend the day investigating a stolen dog," said Opuu drily.

"You are almost correct," said Tama, pushing back his massive custom-built chair of *tau* wood and rising to his feet with surprising grace. "*We* are going to spend the day investigating a stolen dog."

A twenty-three-year former resident of Tahiti, Hayford Peirce is brimming with island tales. He is the author of two separate series of Tahitian crime stories, one of which features Commissaire de Police Alexandre Tama. Tama has the stage to himself this time, but later this year, readers will get a chance to see him in a story featuring Mr. Peirce's other Tahitian detective, P.I. Joe Canelli. ✝

The long black Citroën with Inspector Opuu at the wheel nosed slowly out of the commissariat's courtyard and turned into the deep shade of the flame trees that arched over Avenue Bruat. To the left the road ran two short blocks down to the Cross of Lorraine monument standing at the edge of Papeete's harbor. To the right it ran a few hundred yards past a mixture of ancient colonial and modern administration buildings, then split left and right around the concrete block of the *Gendarmerie Nationale* and climbed into the steep green hills behind town.

As the car moved out of the inky shadows and the road began to climb, Inspector Opuu indicated the gendarmerie with a nod of his head. "Why don't you let *them* look for your missing dog? They never seem particularly busy to me." As a member of the *police judiciaire* of the city of Papeete, Inspector Opuu was not overly fond of the national police, who came mostly from France and whose jurisdiction began outside the city limits.

"Too busy climbing through the mountains looking for plantations of pot," grunted the chief of police. "Besides—this one is in town, so it's our jurisdiction."

"Who does this dog belong to, anyway, the President of the

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French Republic?" The Citroën was moving carefully along the narrow twisting road cut into the dark red earth of the hillside. Below they could catch occasional glimpses of Papeete through the thick green blanket of trees that swept down from the mountains. A few taller buildings ringed the edge of the U-shaped harbor, while out against the Pacific a small plane could be seen lifting off the runway of Faaa International Airport and climbing up across the jagged backdrop of the neighboring island of Mooréa. "Either that, or it's Lassie."

Alexandre Tama snorted, then pulled an enormous red bandanna from his pants and ran it across the drops of sweat that were already beading his forehead. He reached out to turn up the air-conditioning. "This dog's even more valuable than Lassie. Can't you guess? It's the sniffer."

"The sniffer? What—"

"The dog our dear colleagues in the customs service use to sniff out dope at the airport."

"Ah," murmured Inspector Opuu, *"that* dog. Now it begins to make sense."

"I'm so glad you agree with me. Just keep going until we come to the top of the crest. There should be a sign by the road where the handler lives. Blanchard is the name."

The road had narrowed still further and the pavement was badly broken. Most of the houses were behind them; ahead loomed the towering volcanic mountains of the interior, their peaks shrouded in dark clouds. Mango and ironwood trees clustered along the road, and an occasional house could be glimpsed behind thick hedges of hibiscus and false-coffee.

"This is where the dog was stolen from?" asked Inspector Opuu. "Not out at the airport?"

"Here. Didn't you see that article about him in the papers? Or on TV?"

"I didn't pay much attention. I don't like German shepherds—I was bitten by one once."

The Commissaire snorted. "The canine's revenge! Just deserts for all his poor cousins you used to eat up there in the Tuamotus. Anyway, if you bothered to keep up with the news instead of wasting your time playing *pétanque* with all of your lazy cronies, you'd know all about this particularly noble specimen of man's best friend. Although I must say," admitted Tama, "that I myself

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always thought the only really useful purpose dogs served was to sniff out truffles—"

"I thought that was pigs."

"—dogs, too. But that show on television convinced me otherwise. They really *can* find heroin and cocaine wrapped up in all sorts of containers or plastic foam and hidden in the middle of boxes and suitcases. At least they can in France and New Zealand, which is where this particular dog comes from. I don't know if this one has found anything at Faaa yet."

"God knows there's enough of it coming through," muttered Inspector Opuu as he came to a halt to scrutinize a faded sign mostly hidden by a tangle of hibiscus bushes bursting with white and pink blossoms. "Does that look like it might say Blanchard?"

"Close enough. Drive on in." Inspector Opuu got out of the car to push open a sliding gate, then maneuvered the Citroën into the neatly tended garden beyond. The driveway ended in a carport attached to a small concrete-block house of recent construction painted a bright pink. Violet and scarlet bougainvillea climbed up one wall and across a covered porch that ran the length of the house and offered a fine view of Mooréa and of the mountains on the west side of Tahiti.

At the sound of the car a slim young man dressed in the khaki-colored uniform of the customs service moved out of the shadows of the porch and strode briskly into the harsh glare of the late-morning sunlight.

"You're Monsieur Blanchard?" asked Tama as he pulled himself from the Citroën with the aid of a six-inch length of steel tubing welded to the fender just in front of the passenger's door.

"Oui, Monsieur le Commissaire." Blanchard was a *demi-Tahitien* in his late twenties, with wavy black hair and a complexion of pale ivory. His Adam's apple was nearly as long and bony as his hawklike nose.

"My adjunct, Inspector Opuu." The three men shook hands, then climbed into the dark shade of the porch. Sliding glass doors opened onto the living room and, further along the porch, onto what Tama supposed were bedrooms. He scowled at the open doors and the cheerful disorder of the living room. "Did you keep this dog here in the house with you?"

Blanchard's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Oh no, sir. He's a very nice dog, but he has his own quarters out back. It was supposed to be safer that way."

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"For you, or the dog?" muttered Tama as they followed Blanchard along the porch and around the side of the house. Here a large kennel had been carefully constructed against the cement wall of the house using three-inch galvanized pipes and heavy cyclone fencing. The fencing was set into concrete footings; it extended as well across the top of the enclosure, just beneath a sloping wooden roof. The sole door into the kennel was made of the same sturdy pipe and fencing and was secured with a massive brass padlock.

Tama and Opuu stepped closer to peer into the shady kennel. A large wooden doghouse stood in one corner, with a water dish and a food dish just before it. The floor of the yard was of poured concrete sloping towards a drain in the center; a coiled hose was attached to a faucet against the house. Two well-gnawed leg-of-lamb bones and half a loaf of crusty French bread lay nearby.

"All the comforts of home," observed Tama. "How many people know the combination of the padlock?"

"That's what *I* thought when I first saw he was gone," said Blanchard, "but look over here." They moved around to the far side of the kennel, but even then, standing in the deep shade, it took Tama a moment to spot where the fencing had been neatly snipped open in two directions to form a large flap.

"And they've wired it together again with baling wire," said Inspector Opuu.

"So it wouldn't be so noticeable," agreed Tama. "I can't believe that many Tahitians would bother to do that. If they wanted the dog they'd just come in and get him."

Inspector Opuu snorted sceptically. "Every Tahitian I know is like me—scared to death of dogs, especially big ones. The dogs smell the fear and bark like crazy. I don't think any Tahitians could get near this cage without the dog going crazy."

But as Tama discovered by walking slowly around Blanchard's property, the house was almost totally isolated by its position against the hillside. The slope fell away so sharply that it was nearly impossible to build here; the closest neighbor was more than a hundred yards away and totally cut off from sight by the curve of the hill and a dense cluster of *bourau* trees.

Normally, Blanchard said, he worked Saturdays and Sundays, which were the days of heaviest traffic at the airport. This last weekend, however, his wife's sister had gotten married at the far end of the island. Early Saturday morning he and his wife and

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two children had driven off for the wedding and subsequent feast. Afterwards they had spent the night at yet another sister's home in the districts. The dog had been well supplied with food and water; when Blanchard had returned home late Sunday evening he had done nothing more than check that the door to the kennel was properly locked.

"You didn't think it was strange not to see the dog?"

Blanchard shrugged miserably. "Bismarck's a very quiet, very, very well-trained dog. He never barked unless a stranger came to see him. So I thought he was asleep in his house. Maybe I should have called. . . . It was only when I came to feed him early this morning that I saw he was gone."

They walked back to the porch, where the customs officer served icy soda pop, and they went over Blanchard's association with the dog. He had gone to New Zealand five months before and spent three months being trained along with Bismarck in the techniques of searching for hidden contraband. "Every dog has his own particular handler," he said. "That's why the dog lives with me instead of out at the airport. And the kennel here is exactly the same design as the one they used in New Zealand."

"And all this is what they showed on television the other day?" asked Tama.

"Yes. It was a twenty-minute show. There was some footage taken in New Zealand during training, with dogs actually finding heroin and cocaine. Then it showed the two of us working together at the airport, and here at home." He grimaced unhappily. "It showed the kennel, where I lived, how isolated the house is, *everything.*"

"How many people knew you'd all be going to the wedding?"

"It could be anyone on the island. There were fourteen hundred of us at the dinner afterwards, most of them relatives or *fetii.* It was a real old-fashioned *tamaraa*—lots of food and wine and music. Anyone there could have known we'd be staying with my sister-in-law until Sunday night." Blanchard sighed morosely. "This was my first weekend off in two months, you know. I guess it'll be my last—if I'm not fired."

Tama pursed his lips. "Aren't there three or four flights coming in from Los Angeles practically on top of each other early Sunday morning? I'd have thought—"

"Yes, but we actually pay a lot more attention to the weekday flights coming in from Chile via Easter Island. South America is

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where the real dope is—no one's bringing it in from LAX except for personal use."

"Hrmph." Tama finished his second bottle of orange soda. "What about identifying this dog of yours? Could you distinguish him from any other German shepherd? There seem to be a million of the damned things on the island—everyone I know has one."

Blanchard smiled wanly. "Identification's no problem. The people in New Zealand have already thought of that—this is a very valuable dog. What they did was . . ."

"What *I* don't understand," said Inspector Opuu plaintively as he watched the Commissaire take a bite from the first of the two large pizzas Tama had ordered for himself, "is why you're wasting all this time on a miserable dog."

"That assistant minister of social affairs is in town from Paris, remember? They wanted me to bodyguard her around for the next three days. This way I'm too busy—I'm working on a case."

"Ah." The wiry Tuamotu islander took a careful bite of his own small pizza. La Toscana, Commissaire Tama's favorite luncheon spot, was closed on Mondays; today they had strolled a block or so farther down to the waterfront and the shady outdoor setting of L'Api'Zzeria. "So we're actually going to try to find this dog?"

"Yes—at least until *Madame la Ministre* leaves town." Tama leaned forward, his black eyes fixed on the inspector. "I asked you before, Opuu: Why would anyone steal a dog?"

By the time they had finished their pizzas they had considered and discarded a number of possibilities:

That it was just to gain possession of a dog, albeit by sheer coincidence a very valuable one.

That it was to take revenge on either Blanchard or his wife, probably by a jealous girlfriend or boyfriend.

That it was simple mischief—or pure malicious spite.

That Bismarck had been taken in order to search for the numerous plantations of marijuana that grew throughout Tahiti's mountainous and mostly inaccessible interior.

That he had been stolen to sniff out truffles—which in any case didn't grow in Tahiti.

And that he really *had* been stolen in order to provide the main course at a Tuamotuan barbecue.

"How about this?" suggested Inspector Opuu. "There's a particularly big shipment of dope coming through and this is just a safety

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precaution. One less thing for the smugglers to worry about by getting the dog out of the way."

Tama pushed a piece of charred pizza crust about his plate with an enormous brown finger. "Yes, that's a good enough reason, all right. But if that's the case, why bother to *steal* him? Why not just kill him outright? Shoot him right there in the kennel? Or poison him? Tahitians are always poisoning their neighbors' dogs with weed killer."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Opuu.

"It's not a bad idea, though—we'll keep it under consideration." Tama scowled into the earthenware pitcher that earlier had contained half a liter of rosé wine. "But it suggests another idea." He held up a hand to summon the Tahitian waitress, a round little girl in a blue print dress and a billowing white apron. Frizzy black hair fell almost to her plump derrière.

"Look," said Tama, who was infamous throughout town for his love of amateur magic. "I want to show my friend here a trick. Just push these two water glasses around in a circle—here, like this."

The inspector groaned as the giggling waitress began to manipulate the glasses—*le patron* was being particularly tiresome today.

"That's enough," said Tama a minute later. "Now, I want you to put a hand on top of each of the glasses so that none of the water can get out. All right, good." Tama passed his own gigantic hand slowly back and forth over the girl's hands. "Perfect. Now then, I want you to reach very, very carefully into the apron pocket on your *left* hip. Careful, not too fast! What's that you've got there?"

Slack-jawed, the astonished waitress pulled forth a tumbler half filled with rosé wine.

"Misdirection," said Tama smugly when the bewildered girl had been sent to fetch *tarte tatin* and coffee. "The principle of all sleight of hand. You're made to look at—or to expect—one thing, and then something else entirely different happens."

Inspector Opuu had heard the same dictum many times before, usually accompanied by some childish trick. "What's this got to do with the dog?" he demanded sourly.

"You suggested that maybe the dog was stolen to prevent him sniffing out a particularly important load of dope being smuggled in. Suppose this was just misdirection, what they *wanted* us to think. The real reason is that they're getting ready to smuggle

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something *out* of Tahiti. They think we'll spend all our time and efforts tearing every incoming plane to pieces—and in the meantime whatever it is they're smuggling out goes through without a glance from us."

"It's possible," agreed Inspector Opuu after a long pause, "but tell me this: Just what is there in Tahiti worth smuggling out? Black pearls? U.S. dollars? Coral-reef jewelry? Girly calendars that would be pornography in Iran? Now that they've lifted currency controls, there's nothing at all it's illegal to take out of Tahiti—except drugs. And if they're smuggling out drugs that have already been brought in for transhipment, then the question is the same as you just asked—why not just kill the damned dog in the first place?"

"Hrmph." Tama's lips tightened and he ran a hand through his thick mop of jet-black hair.

"Let's look at this logically," said Opuu. "A dog that sniffs out coke has been stolen. Isn't it logical to suppose that it was stolen in order to sniff out coke?"

"Sniff out coke? Nonsense! Coke isn't produced here in Tahiti. Why would—" Tama's voice trailed off and his face grew thoughtful. "I see what you mean," he said at last, poking idly at his *tarte tatin*. "Someone, let's say Monsieur X, has brought in some dope for transhipment, or even for distribution here. Someone else, Monsieur Y, let's say, knows this and roughly where the dope is but not *exactly* where it is. And Monsieur Y wants it for himself. So Monsieur Y steals the dog to sniff it out. Brilliant, Opuu, that's really a terrific idea." He leaned forward. "But now what? We've got a whole island, plus an archipelago of another hundred and fourteen islands covering an area as big as Europe from Portugal to Moscow, with two hundred thousand people on them. And half of them seem to own German shepherds. Why couldn't this damned sniffer be a big white French poodle? Or a three-legged Labrador?"

"Why don't we offer a reward for the sighting of every German shepherd? It'd take a lot of work to check them all out, but sooner or later—"

"If we did that, whoever stole him would just kill the dog out of hand and bury him. No, Opuu, we've got to *think* our way to this dog."

"Hrmph," snorted the inspector, sounding almost like his superior. "So let's think then. Here's what *I* think: No Tahitian would

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come within a mile of the damned thing. So that eliminates, what? One hundred and eighty out of the two hundred thousand people you mentioned? And most Chinese are just as afraid of dogs as Tahitians are, so that eliminates another—"

"Unless, of course, they're a member of the Kennel Club," muttered Tama around a mouthful of pie.

"The Kennel Club?"

"Those characters you see in the newspapers every now and then showing off their dogs and all the tricks they've been taught. Most of the dogs seem to be German shepherds, if I remember the pictures right, and there are all sorts of members in the Club—mostly French, but some Chinese and some Tahitians too. None of *them* would be afraid to steal a great big dog."

"Hmmm," murmured Opuu, sipping his coffee. "But where does *that* get us?"

"Let's just see," said Tama, suddenly incisive. "You've got your phone with you?"

The inspector rummaged through the attaché case he had placed beneath the table and handed over a dark green phone. "I've got a cousin, I think, who belongs to this dog club," rumbled the Commissaire. "I'll get the switchboard to track her down."

Three phone calls later, Tama returned the phone to Opuu. "We're in luck—the secretary of the club is the director of the Territorial Office of Statistics. If there's *anyone* on this island who's organized, it's *him.*" The Commissaire pushed himself to his feet. "I don't dare go back to the office—let's go see this fellow Beaudenon."

"The TOS is down in the old Donald Building. Shall I get the car?"

"For half a mile? It'd take us all day to get through the traffic—we'll walk."

Monsieur le Directeur de l'Office Territoriale des Statistiques was a roly-poly little Corsican with thick spectacles and a toothy grin who had once been a nationally ranked tennis player in France and was still the island's best player. He was also, Tama discovered to his dismay, the president of the local Macintosh Club as well as being secretary to the Kennel Club.

"Look," said Gérard Beaudenon, hunched over a bank of Macintosh computers that took up an entire wall of his corner office. "Here's a list of all this year's members. These are the ones who've

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paid their dues. Here's the kind of dogs they have. Here's how long they've been members. Here's the prizes they've won, listed by—"

"Very impressive," interrupted Tama. "I *told* Opuu you were the most organized man on the island." He rubbed his chin as he scowled at the brightly colored computer screen. "Tell me this: Could you give us a list of everyone who's ever been a member of the club, even if they're no longer members?"

"I can tell you what kind of *toothpaste* they use to clean their dogs' teeth! All I have to do is merge my annual membership records, sort the new list, and then eliminate the duplications. With a Macintosh you can—"

"Could you also give us their addresses and phone numbers?" asked Tama hastily before the Frenchman could expound further upon the marvels of his machine.

"Of course. The only problem is that I've only been secretary for four years now. Before then we don't have any lists at all. So all I can give you is data I've entered myself." As he talked, his fingers flashed across the keyboard and groups of names scrolled down the screen. "What font do you want it printed up in? What size? How many copies?"

"Three," said Tama decisively. "If that doesn't do it, we'll just have to put our thinking caps back on."

"Do you really think these Kennel Club nuts brush their dogs' teeth?" blurted Inspector Opuu, who had maintained a brooding silence ever since leaving the office of the Club's secretary.

"I wouldn't put it past them," muttered Tama, his eyes fixed on the elegantly printed list of names in his hand. "There are hundreds of names here. How are we going to—"

"Look at this," interrupted Inàs Chin Foo, a birdlike Chinese woman from the records office with a sticklike figure, an ethereally beautiful face the color of burnished gold, and the most prodigious memory short of a mainframe computer. "I'll have to check it in the records to make certain, of course, but here's a name we've had dealings with, and here's another, and here's another."

The three members of the *police judiciaire* were gathered around a small table in the commissariat's shabby conference room, a cup of coffee and a list before each of them.

"Hmmm," rumbled Alexandre Tama. "Daniel Arapari, commission salesman. Doesn't ring a bell. Jacqui Tai Chong Woa, *dit*

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Jack. *Homme de commerce.* Isn't he the one who was running the gambling hall in the back of his curios shop by the marketplace? A suspended sentence and a big fine?"

"That's the one. He's running it now in his son-in-law's shop next-door. There were a couple of old, *old* Chinese smoking opium when we raided it. And Daniel Arapari was caught with twenty-seven marijuana plants growing behind his house in Titioro: a suspended sentence and a small fine."

"Hrmph," growled the Commissaire. "If everyone on this blasted island who'd ever been let off with a suspended sentence was thrown in jail this afternoon, the three of us in this room would be the only ones walking around free." He eyed the third name Inàs Chin Foo had pointed to. "Didier von Sache de Gaumont. That's the Yacht Club beefcake who runs that scuba-diving outfit from the houseboat on the waterfront. And—" his voice grew noticeably more enthusiastic "—who was mixed up in that coke bust a couple of years ago."

The Chinese girl nodded. "We almost got him, but there wasn't quite enough direct evidence. The *Procureur* finally gave up and didn't bring charges."

"I remember: He simply denied everything and wouldn't say a word otherwise. Very smart—a good thing for us that most of our other customers just talk and talk and talk." He turned to Inspector Opuu. "Remember de Gaumont?"

"I remember—and if there's anyone on this island who has the nerve to steal the sniffer and use it for his own little treasure hunt, it's de Gaumont. I think he's half crazy."

Tama nodded. Didier von Sache de Gaumont was a handsome young Frenchman of supposed aristocratic origin who had appeared in Polynesia four or five years earlier with a somewhat older but still strikingly beautiful German wife of undisputed noble background and apparently limitless funds. Not long after their arrival, the muscular de Gaumont had generated a certain amount of local interest by being the first—and still the only—person to windsurf the entire one hundred and forty miles of open ocean between Tahiti and Bora-Bora. He had been escorted by two ships and a helicopter, but it was still an impressive athletic accomplishment. After another nine months of nonstop partying, the German countess had suddenly stepped on a plane for Sydney and out of de Gaumont's life forever. Penniless, he opened a mod-

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est scuba-diving business with the financial aid of one of the many local girlfriends who had been the cause of his wife's departure.

Two years later, a cousin of de Gaumont's named Bertrand de Roseville had arrived in Tahiti in his tiny one-man yacht from the Indian Ocean island of Réunion. He was, it seemed, the champion surfer of that French possession and brought with him three enormous custom-built surfboards that were nearly as large as the boat itself. He immediately set up housekeeping with his cousin and de Gaumont's current girlfriend, along with two comely feminine discards of de Gaumont's. A month later, a jealous fight between the three female members of the household led one of them to the commissariat; here she denounced Bertrand de Roseville as having brought with him three surfboards stuffed with coke.

One of the surfboards was indeed found to contain nearly two kilograms of cocaine carefully hidden within its fiberglass body. Another revealed a recess in which traces of cocaine were identified. The third surfboard was never found; de Roseville maintained until the day he was led away for a four-year sentence in the local prison that the surfboard had been stolen soon after his arrival.

"And he refused to implicate his beefcake cousin, de Gaumont," marveled Commissaire Tama, "even though two of the three wretched sluts swore they were hand-in-glove in dealing it." He snorted angrily. "Honor among thieves!"

"Well, the fact is," said Opuu, "it was his word against the two girls', with de Gaumont's own girl swearing it was all a setup by the two other jealous sluts. And with him being a French citizen, of course, we couldn't even get him kicked off the island."

"Not one of our triumphs," agreed Tama. "De Roseville is still in prison, but de Gaumont is still walking around, charming the pants off every female tourist with a yen for scuba diving, and the surfboard with the problematic cache of coke has never turned up either."

"Either it's been long since used up," said Opuu, "or the dumb Tahitian kid who stole the board and repainted it is still riding the waves on a couple million francs of dope without knowing it, or—"

"—or we've got Didier von Sache de Gaumont with at least an approximate idea of where the coke might be—and a sniffer dog to root it out for him."

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"Do you *really* think this de Gaumont—" began Inàs Chin Foo.

"Of course I don't!" thundered Tama. "Do I look like an idiot? And neither do I think that this pot-growing Daniel Arapari or this Chinese opium den operator have got the damned dog either. But we've wasted this much time already, we might as well waste a little more."

Inspector Opuu frowned sceptically. "So we're just going to follow these three Kennel Club types around until they lead us to Bismarck—or we all die of old age?"

"Essentially, yes. But I think I've got an idea how we might significantly speed things up."

"How?"

Tama heaved himself to his feet with his usual unexpected agility. "We'll use a little misdirection of our own. But we've got to hurry."

Chez les Trois Petites Tantes was celebrated throughout Lyons for serving the best *bourguignon* in all of Burgundy. After its three awestruck proprietors had watched a youthful Alexandre Tama—then a mere inspector-in-training—consume four enormous portions all by himself, they had been prevailed upon to reveal the secrets of their *spécialité.*

Now, two decades later, the Commissaire's diminutive Tahitian wife, Angelina, as slim and dainty as he was stout, still prepared the dish according to the sacred formula—along with a few subtle improvements of her own that she was too wise ever to mention.

On Tuesday night, the day after Bismarck was discovered missing, Alexandre Tama reluctantly pushed himself away from the table on which an enormous casserole of *boeuf bourguignon* still sat. "Time for the news," he said, glancing at his watch. "They promised me it'd be the first thing they showed."

Two minutes later, a solemn-faced announcer wearing a garish red sport coat and a hideous green necktie led off the evening news by announcing in dirgelike tones that Bismarck, the celebrated sniffer dog of the *Service des Douanes,* had been basely and cravenly murdered. The broadcaster's face was replaced by a shadowy picture of three men in the blue uniforms of the *police judiciaire* standing grimly around an unmoving object—a German shepherd lying in the midst of a profusion of rubbish and filth.

"In the early hours of this morning," the announcer intoned, "a macabre discovery was made behind *Le Garage Herchuelz* in the

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industrial zone of Tipaerui Valley. It was the corpse of Bismarck, the million-franc dog—with a knife plunged brutally into his heart!"

Angelina Tama gasped as a closeup on the screen showed the handle of an enormous butcher knife protruding from the brown and black pelt on the dog's ribs. Dried brown blood matted most of the dog's side.

The leathery face of Inspector Opuu replaced the dog. Scowling, he recounted how Bismarck had been discovered missing the day before. So far, he said, in spite of all their efforts, the police had no leads to the instigator of this cowardly crime.

The inspector was replaced by a wan Marcel-Pierre Blanchard, who was shown pointing out Bismarck's kennel and who then told in a halting voice how he had been summoned to identify the remains of his canine companion.

Next came the director of customs at Faaa International Airport. "We feel certain," he said, "that this horrible crime was committed in order to expedite the smuggling of a major shipment of illicit substances through our airport in the relatively near future. We have, therefore, doubled our scrutiny of all incoming flights and taken other security measures that I am not at liberty to reveal. I will tell you this, however: Nothing will enter our island via Faaa International!"

"To conclude," murmured the announcer, "here are some pictures of the martyred Bismarck undergoing his training in New Zealand, as well as—"

Alexandre Tama clicked off the television. "Time for coffee," he said, rising to his feet. "But first, perhaps, a little bit of cheese."

"Oh, Alexandre, I *do* hope you'll catch the killers of that poor dog!"

"We will, *chérie,* we will," promised the chief of police.

The door to Alexandre Tama's office opened and a large brown and black German shepherd padded through silently. He walked to the center of the room, where he sat on his haunches and fixed his liquid brown eyes unblinkingly on the *Commissaire de Police.*

"What the devil is *this?"* cried the nonplussed Tama at the open doorway.

Inspector Opuu's head appeared around the side of the door. "Meet Bismarck. He wanted to come and thank you in person."

"Opuu, get the devil in here and explain yourself!"

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The normally dour Tuamotuan was grinning broadly as he entered the room, followed closely by the dog's handler, Marcel-Pierre Blanchard.

"Hrmph! So it all worked out, did it?" Pushing aside the paperwork that littered his desk, Tama regarded the still motionless dog with curiosity.

"Like a charm," burbled Inspector Opuu enthusiastically. "We put a discreet surveillance on all three suspects, with more on de Gaumont than the other two. Yesterday afternoon, just before dusk, de Gaumont left the house in Mamao he shares with his present girlfriend and drove off to the house of his *other* girlfriend."

The Commissaire shook his head. "And the rest of the world thinks we *Tahitians* have nothing but sex on our minds. We've got nothing on these Europeans!"

The inspector nodded sardonically. "Girlfriends sometimes serve more purposes than one. De Gaumont went into her house and when he came out five minutes later, guess what he had?"

"Our friend Bismarck here?"

"Absolutely. They got in his car and drove out to Papara."

"Papara?" muttered Tama. "Let me guess. The Surf Club? They have a whole bunch of great big surfboards locked up on their beach in some sort of burglar-proof contraption, as I recall."

"Right again. We had a terrible time following him through the rush-hour traffic but we managed. When we finally got to the Surf Club, de Gaumont got out of the car with the dog and, bold as you please, walked the dog three or four times back and forth past all the surfboards that had been locked up for the night. These are all the professional models, three or four yards long, nothing at all like the little Styrofoam ones you see kids on the road carrying under their arms."

Squinting quizzically at the inspector, Tama pursed his lips. "Tell me this, Opuu: Why the devil didn't you just arrest him the moment he appeared with the dog—as you were *supposed* to do?"

"So he could get a one-month suspended sentence for stealing a dog?" retorted the inspector hotly. "If it even turned out to be the right dog? With a couple of kilos of coke in his hands, though, it'd be a different story—four or five years of *real* prison time. And anyway, where could he go with the dog on an island as small as this? We could always step in and arrest him any time we wanted to."

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"I see. So what happened at the Surf Club?"

"Nothing at all. The dog completely ignored every surfboard in sight. So they got back in the car and drove back to town—and right on through to the other side."

"Hmmm. To the Yacht Club in Arue, perhaps?"

"Yes indeed. They have the same sort of heavy-duty cage with all sorts of boards locked up in it as the Surf Club. It was dark by the time we got there. De Gaumont got out of his car with the dog, nodded to a couple of people who were having drinks on the terrace, then walked right over to that spot by the boat slips where all the members' boards are chained together for the night."

"Yes. And then?"

"And then he and Bismarck just walked up and down past the surfboards two or three times until the dog started getting excited and began pawing and rubbing his nose against one of the boards. A bright red one at least four yards long with a blue and yellow *tiki* painted on it—not very well. Obviously an amateur job."

"So then de Gaumont got out his chain cutters and pipe cutters and—"

"At the *Yacht* Club? Even de Gaumont isn't *that* crazy—he'd have been mobbed. He put the dog back in the car, went to the bar, and made a few phone calls, then ordered dinner and sat back to wait. He really is a cool customer."

"And eventually the present-day owner of the surfboard showed up?"

"Exactly. A Frenchwoman I've never seen before. She says, incidentally, that she bought it from a Tahitian, who bought it from a Chinese, who bought it from a—" Opuu waved his hand dismissively. "Anyway, de Gaumont bought her a beer, haggled with her for a little while, then wrote out a check—and drove off with her surfboard attached to the top of his car."

"And with you in hot pursuit. Excellent, Opuu, really excellent. Then what?"

"Then it was back to the girlfriend's who'd been keeping the dog for him. A little while later we heard hammering and power-saw sounds coming from the backyard. So we walked around the house and arrested them just as they were pulling the bag of coke from inside the board."

Alexandre Tama stared at Opuu in frank admiration. "Wonderful, Opuu. *You* should be sitting here instead of me. And it really was coke?"

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"Oh yes, the *Brigade des Stupes* is analyzing it right now. A little less than two kilograms."

Tama rose to his feet and moved around the desk. He patted the top of Bismarck's head with a massive hand. "And Bismarck here—did our friend de Gaumont admit stealing him?"

"Of course not. Said it was his girlfriend's dog, and then completely clammed up. Hasn't said another word since."

"Hrmph! We'll see how far that gets him *this* time." The Commissaire turned to Blanchard. "This *is* your dog? You'll swear to that in court?"

The handler grinned. "Of course. Look, just where I told you it was." He murmured softly to the dog, then pulled away the lower lip from Bismarck's shiny white teeth. There on the moist red and black flesh of the inner lip Tama could clearly read the tattooed letters: BISMARCK.

"That ought to do it," agreed the Commissaire. "And this girlfriend of de Gaumont's—who's *she?*"

Blanchard grimaced unhappily. "A cousin of my wife's brother's girlfriend. She was at the wedding—and knew a week or so in advance that we were going to be spending the night in the districts."

Tama ran his fingers back and forth in the short fur around Bismarck's ears. "Who would have thought that dogs could be so intelligent? That shepherd the Kennel Club people found us for the TV show absolutely didn't move a muscle while they were making him up to look like he had a knife sticking out of his ribs or while they were shooting their pictures with him lying there in all that trash."

Inspector Opuu grunted dourly—he *still* didn't like German shepherds.

A smile tugged at the corners of the Commissaire's broad mouth. "I think this calls for a celebration, *messieurs*. Let's walk down to La Toscana for an early lunch—and I'll buy our friend Bismarck here the biggest steak in the house." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

BREAKFAST DATE

by S. K. Hodson

I first spot him in that gay bar, and no, I'm not. I just work there, not as an employee but scamming the crowd for small change and something to do while I look for my next mark.

See, the pretty boys haven't put in the hetero-bar time their straight brothers have. My guess is they stayed in until they came out. Anyway, the stalest cons are new here. I clear maybe twenty, thirty dollars a night on bar bets, making change in my favor, and the other tired grifts, all for the cost of a pitcher of sangría for my new buddies.

Shelagh K. Hodson's debut piece is the third *EQMM* first story to have its origin in a single writers group in Rochester, New York. This would be a remarkable coincidence were it not that all three shared a superb writing teacher, *EQMM* author Miriam Grace Monfredo. Congratulations to both students and teacher!

Pocket money. I'm looking for someone who fits a size 12-D con job. Something about this guy draws my attention, for no real reason. I trust my gut, as usual. You gotta have a feel for these things.

It's a two-way street; he's checking me out, smiling. I nod, pretending I'm shy, and turn my attention back to my glass.

You wouldn't know he was Mr. Right to look at him. He's plain, maybe thirty, with sandy hair receding a little, soft and stocky but not fat, dressed out of Sears. He looks like a poor Republican from a smallish town, nervous about being here. The regulars eye him and turn away. He's not special. Not even trying to be.

What do they know? He's special because he's here, as out of place

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as a coyote in a salt-water aquarium. Since he's not dressed to attract, I know he wants somebody who is. Which means he has what it takes. What I want.

Money.

We don't speak, although our eyes meet again later that night. He lifts his drink, something with a cherry, in an across-the-room toast. A manhattan, in Milwaukee? At least it's not beer. I raise mine back, acknowledging.

When he leaves around ten, I follow him to a shabby apartment building on North 25th. I keep going after he turns into the lot.

He doesn't spend his money on clothes, his car, or his apartment. What, then?

I've been working the con for five years, and I tell you, men get some expensive toys when they're around his age. Thirty is when the single boys indulge.

These are the guys who keep studio-quality sound and video equipment in crappy apartments they're too lazy to leave. Or five or six state-of-the-art computers. Model trains, planes, or ships, woodworking tools, rare books, cameras—something. You get into the apartment and you can leave with a couple thousand in goods.

Or you can study it and use what you learn to buddy up later and take them for ten times that, once they teach you to separate the best they've got from the rest.

Over the next several weeks I see him often. He likes the younger guys, buys them lots of drinks, but it isn't enough. The hustlers don't have the nose for a score, or the patience. My instincts tell me he's definitely got something rare, something private, so I follow him when he leaves maybe four times. He's just one of several irons I have in the fire, not always the hottest.

He usually goes home alone. Once he gets lucky with an effeminate young black guy who goes inside the apartment building and doesn't come back out in the five minutes I watch.

Okay, so I'm not his type. There's a million scams that don't need looks. I just need to know how to work him.

One night I follow him thinking I'll see if he goes right to bed; I can do a passable drunk clumsily trying to unlock "my own apartment," except a couple keys are lock picks. I'll just wait until he's been asleep awhile, go in and look around for five silent minutes, and lock up when I leave. I'm good, nearly as good as I am at the con, but burglary's not for me. Too many armed citizens.

Our eyes have met enough times that I think I could start a conversation, maybe buy him a drink. Once *he* finds out I've just fallen

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for and begun collecting whatever it is he has, he'll tell me all about it. I can expect a tour of his hoard, if I do my job right.

His lights don't go out until eleven-thirty. I figure I'll give him forty minutes to get to sleep.

Except he comes out and gets in his car, carrying something no bigger than a shoebox.

Another bar at this hour doesn't feel right. Boyfriend? I follow him, keeping well back because there's hardly any traffic. He's a good driver, signals his turns, obeys the limit all the way to a brick factory building where he parks and walks in with one of those metal lunch boxes.

Graveyard shift. I figure I have not five minutes but hours to peruse his treasures. The lock is unfamiliar, obviously tenant-installed. He didn't even repaint around the different shape. Like I said, I'm good; strange lock, but I'm through the door in three minutes.

The smell is unpleasant, and familiar. It takes me a minute to place it: Taxidermy. And cigarettes.

Where am I gonna fence a moose head? I think, laughing to myself. New lock means valuables. "Valuable" in taxidermy would be rare animals, I guess. Endangered species? Yeah, like he's gonna have mounted pandas. Probably he's into more than one hobby. Taxidermy can't cost all that much. Maybe he hunts and mounts his kills.

Guns. Depending on what he's got, a small fortune is entirely possible. I'm smiling as I softly close the door behind me, making sure it latches. It wouldn't do to have some neighbor see it ajar and walk in.

I spend some time looking around, but whatever he's got, I sure as hell can't find it. I'm pretty thorough, without leaving any sign that anybody was here. There's a big pot on the stove simmering real low, and a steel drum that stinks when you get near. I don't peek into either one. I don't think I want to know how these guys get from living creature to mounted specimen.

Okay, then, I'm out of here.

The door doesn't open from the inside. There's a place for a key, but no matter what I do with my lock picks, the handle doesn't turn. I can't even feel the tumblers, much less make them click.

I force calm. Think. The brain that works every mark smooth as wet glass is the same one that saved me from several beatings before I got so good. I can think on my feet. A grifter's greatest gift.

Another way out, then. Apartment 213 is too high to jump; at the least I'd break both legs, at worst my back or skull. No way to climb

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up. Okay, call for help. There's a lock on the phone, like people have to keep their kids off those 900 numbers. Self-conscious, I shout "Help!" out the two windows I can get open, but nobody responds even when I abandon my pride and scream "Fire!"

Fire? I see smoke detectors, but I don't think anything less than a real fire is going to get the firemen here. I'm not starting a fire where I'm trapped.

Annoy the neighbors until they call the cops? Usually I avoid interacting with the police, but for this I'll make an exception. I thump walls, floors, and ceiling, blast the radio and TV, but it falls on deaf ears or empty apartments.

Think, I order myself. Do your damned job.

Before any big scam I conduct a rousing internal pep talk. Hey, I can *do* it! I'm the guy who talked four Marines into betting, and losing, their tickets home, convinced them not to beat me up, and let them buy me one last drink before they left. Now *that* was hard. This is one guy, an easy one who's smiled and nodded and toasted me. He already likes me.

Good thing, because he's going to find me here in his apartment when he gets off work. I'll have to learn what I can, then wing it. Good; my best work is off-the-cuff, everybody says so.

I might have to do some pretty distasteful things; he'll recognize me from the gay bar. I'll pretend I'm new at it, confused and scared, but that I like them. And him.

To a con man, knowledge is power. I have an eight-hour factory shift to learn everything I can about this guy, to have exactly the right answer for any damned thing he says or does, the right reaction to every action. He's not only going to let me leave, but we'll make a date for later.

I find photo albums and memorize what little they tell about growing up with Mom and Dad and Grandma and a tidy suburban house.

Canceled checks will tell more. Kroger's, Sears, cash, the phone company, rent, Target, Exxon, Kroger's again, but then, my exit visa: a whole string of ten- and twenty-five-dollar donations to charities.

He may not have much, but he wants to help people with less. Isn't that the essence of being a good man? A good man capable of forgiveness, even mercy? Okay, not great, but it's a jumping-off place. I have seven hours to hone it until it sings.

I put back the checks, every one signed in an uncommonly readable hand: Jeffrey Dahmer.

I'm betting that I not only get away with breaking and entering, but that he has me for breakfast. ●

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Concrete Crosses

by Angie Irvine

In her second piece for *EQMM*, and her second published work of fiction, Carmel, California author Angie Irvine again makes use of subsidiary characters from the Traveler novels written by her husband Bob Irvine. Ms. Irvine is a computer engineer by day; she is currently at work on a high-tech thriller.

The summer of fifty-seven came early to Utah. The previous winter had been dry, and for the first time in living memory the glacier on Mount Timpanogos retreated, leaving a naked scar on the side of the mountain. The Wasatch Mountains were brown by June, and Salt Lake City baked. When the fires came, in August, the smoke boiled down the mountain's flanks and settled in the basin, choking the city. The sidewalks were slick with soot and gray ash swirled in the air like some perverted imitation of a winter snow storm. The more nervous in the town cried Armageddon and took to the Temple in droves.

I found that whiskey was a powerful remedy for cleansing the throat, but I guess I wasn't the only one. All my usual sources in this state were overwhelmed with demand. I had to make a run north to Idaho to stock up.

When the smokejumpers were killed, the headlines were big even up north. One of the boys was a local kid who lived on a ranch just outside of Samaria where I went to replace my stock. Driving up to the general store I noticed the door was draped in black bunting. The kid's stepdad shopped there, the owner told me, and he wanted folks to remember that they had lost one of their own. I looked at the fly-specked display windows and the dust coating the cans and thought that in a small community each life helps shore up the barricade against the wilderness. Lose enough pieces and the barricade crumbles. I shivered and high-tailed it back to town.

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And now, a year later, this grim-faced man sat in my office, another casualty of the big blowup at Hardscrabble Creek. His name was Harold Torvilson and he had an ugly gleam in his eye.

"Mr. Traveler, I want you to bring my son's murderer to justice," he said, sliding a newspaper clipping across the surface of my desk.

The clipping's headline read, "Forest Ranger Saves Life by Setting Fire." I looked up at Torvilson.

"Go ahead, read it," he urged at my questioning glance.

The article was about the blowup at Hardscrabble and how this guy, James Ferguson, the crew boss, had set a fire right where he was standing and then lain down in the hot ashes. Evidently the fire he set burned off enough fuel that the big fire that was just behind it roared right past him. It was a hungry fire, consuming everything in its path, including Ferguson's crew.

"They were just boys, you know. My Donny'd just turned eighteen." For the first time I thought I caught just a trace of emotion in his voice, but there was some inner fire stoking him that had dried up all the tears.

"I don't understand," I said, handing him back the clipping. It was worn and crumpled like he'd squeezed it in his fist.

"I used to be a smokejumper, before I broke my leg. Broke it in so many pieces the quacks never could get it right. They wanted to give me a desk job, but I wouldn't have it." The limp had been noticeable when he'd come in. Evidently he was too proud to use a cane.

"I know fires," he continued. "The fire Ferguson set, that's the one that killed them. He saved his own hide and killed my boy. My Donny could run, he could run like the wind. If Ferguson hadn't set that fire where he did, Donny would have made it to safety. They found his body the farthest out." He said it with a kind of pride, as if "last one dead" was better than just plain dead.

I shifted some in my chair. It was hard to feel comfortable in the same room with this man. He had that ability to be perfectly still in a world full of winks and nods and other small motions that most of us indulge in when we're carrying on a conversation. Among my acquaintances, only my Indian friends can be that still.

"The police don't like outsiders messing in their affairs, Mr. Torvilson." I didn't try a smile; it would have been wasted.

"This isn't a police matter," he replied. The words came out, but we weren't really having a conversation.

"Murder usually is," I insisted.

"Not this one. They're too stupid and pigheaded to see what's as

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plain as the nose on their faces." He hesitated a minute, but I could tell he was going to come out with it.

"Besides," setting his teeth he spat out his words like they were giving him indigestion, "it happened on federal territory."

Neither one of us said anything for a spell, and I looked out my office window at the Wasatch Mountains east of the city. They were federal territory.

"It's still a police matter," I finally answered. "We don't call them Federal Police, but you should be talking to the FBI."

"Nobody thinks a crime was committed. The Forest Service is investigating. The Forest Service, can you beat that? They're scrambling to cover their hides. That's what they're doing."

"And what is it they're covering up?" I asked softly. For all his stillness I figured his pot was on the boil.

"How he was murdered. How they all were murdered," he intoned. "In the fire. Last year."

I didn't like the way this conversation was going. "I'm not sure what you expect me to do. You say that the Forest Service is investigating. Surely they'll be in a position to tell if this Ferguson did anything wrong."

"They'll try to cover it up, mark my words. But if they think there's someone looking over their shoulder, there's a better chance maybe . . ." His voice trailed off and his eyes got kind of blank. Whatever he was seeing, it sure wasn't me. Then he roused himself, hunching up a little, and it seemed to me he sort of shrunk until he was just a tired old man grieving for his kid. "I'm just asking you to keep them honest, Mr. Traveler. That's all."

Well, I guess he got to me after all. I had a young boy and I'd nearly lost him once. "I don't know if I can be of any real help, but I tell you what I'll do. Give me three days. I'll nose around a bit. If it looks like I can make any contribution to this mess, I'll let you know. And if I can't, I'll let you know that too and we'll call it quits. Deal?"

He nodded his assent and pulled out his checkbook, but I stopped him. "This is a handshake deal," I said and held out my mitt.

"Handshake deal," he replied and took my hand. He braced his shoulders and stoked up the fires some. I think I liked him better the other way.

I took some particulars and he gave me a couple of names. Then he walked out of the office ramrod straight. You could barely notice the limp.

I called Anson Horne, Salt Lake City's chief of police. Not that Anson's a good buddy of mine, but he's honest as the day is long

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and we knew more things about one another than casual acquaintances had any right.

"We know about Torvilson," Horne's deep voice rolled out of the receiver end of the phone. If I'd held it out about two feet I would've been able to hear him just as good. Anson was in your force-of-nature category, nothing stopped him. "Lay off of this one, Martin. Your client is barking up the wrong tree."

"Why, because my client is wrong or because you want me to?"

"Your client is a damn fool, and you're an even bigger one," he replied and hung up on me. Now I've never known Anson to swear, him being in the Church and all, so I must have upset him some. Or more likely, Torvilson had rubbed him raw. It was clear that Anson didn't take the charges of murder seriously.

I took off for the county library and spent a dull afternoon reading. The phone was ringing as I got back. It was Anson.

"I got a couple of bottles of near beer that could be cooling in the creek," he growled. This was as close to an apology as I was going to get.

"See you in ten," I replied and hung up.

When I got there I was surprised to see that Horne wasn't alone. The other man was short and stocky, but he filled out his police uniform a lot better than Anson did. His sandy complexion looked a lot healthier than Anson's, too.

"This is Red Hadley," Anson said.

Somehow I didn't think that the sandy hair was red enough for the nickname, but it might have faded with age. Probably he had a quick temper, most carrot-tops do. I wondered what he was doing here.

We shook hands. "Glad to meet you. Thought I knew most of the boys in blue around here."

"Red's from up north," Anson interjected. "He signed on with us right after Christmas."

We stood around some, after that, both me and Red looking at Horne, waiting for him to get on with it. Anson plunged his hand into City Creek and dragged out a cooler. "Have one," he commanded, thrusting a bottle of his favorite near beer in my direction.

"I don't generally drink alone," I replied. Red must've thought that was pretty funny, 'cause he guffawed and got his own bottle from the cooler. Anson just got red in the face.

"This guy Torvilson is a troublemaker," Horne blurted out.

"Trouble for who?" I asked, taking a swig. The stuff was cold, that's all I can say.

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"Think I'd let a murder go by on my watch?"

"Isn't your territory, way I hear it," I answered.

Hadley chimed in, "Torvilson came in with some cock-'n'-bull story about those kids being murdered. If it was true, do you think we wouldn't care?" His complexion was suffused with an ugly angry glow, no wonder people called him Red.

"Chief," I turned to Horne, "what do you want from me? You know I got a living to make, just like you. But I haven't got such a heavy load. I don't want to add to yours, but I've got to make my way."

Hadley grabbed my arm. "They were just kids and they all died. Nothing's going to bring them back. Torvilson calls me every day." Anson gently pulled him away.

"There's nothing to this," Horne continued, "but anything you find out, you tell me first. I don't want this Torvilson doing anything stupid."

"Like hiring me?"

"Like taking matters into his own hands."

Anson and I, we looked at each other. Hadley wasn't part of this; I don't know why Horne brought him. It wasn't necessary for me to speak, we knew each other that well. "Thanks for the beer." I gave him a half salute. "It almost tasted like one."

I spun on my heel and left them there, two rubes drinking near beer by City Creek.

Next morning I trekked up to the ranger station out at Henefe. I'd finally turned the old pre-war Chevy in for a later model. The Buick Super purred along the road and I was glad I'd let the top down. The air was still cool and fresh. It would stay that way for a while in the shadow of the Wasatch.

The ranger station didn't turn out to be much to look at and neither did Edgar Benson. He was kind of a short ugly guy who reminded me of a toad, fat and all puffed up with his own importance. He didn't like giving out information. Probably he didn't have any and didn't want to admit it.

"The inquiry is ongoing," he repeated for what must have been the tenth or eleventh time.

"Look, I just want to help put this thing to rest," I replied. "Got any kids?" I asked, trying to find some common ground with this guy.

"My personal life is no business of yours," he retorted stiffly and I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere.

"Thanks for nothing," I said and withdrew as best I could. I got

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back in the car and drove on north. Thought I'd go take a look at the site. Sure wasn't going to ask permission from the sourpuss I'd just been bantering with.

Hardscrabble was about an hour's drive from Henefe and when I got there I realized I couldn't take the car all the way in. I was wearing city shoes, but the going didn't look all that bad. There was a path leading through a small stand of pine trees that had surprisingly survived the firestorm. I thought I'd walk a ways in.

As soon as I got round a bend in the path the ground opened up to a little valley. There's where they got caught, I thought. They were walking out of the Wasatch after successfully fighting a fire up at Mahogany Ridge. They were tired and hungry and all they wanted to do was reach the road. It was their bad luck that a lightning strike had started a blaze in front of them.

"It started just about where you're standing." A voice behind me spoke aloud the thought that was running in my head. I just about jumped out of my skin.

"You shouldn't sneak up on a body so," I said. "Might like to get you killed someday."

Red Hadley gave me a deadpan look and shrugged his shoulders. "I wasn't particularly trying to be quiet," he replied. "You seemed pretty wrapped up in your own thoughts."

"Can't say I particularly expected to see anyone around here. 'Specially you. I thought you were solidly of the act-of-God school of thought."

"Got curious, that's all. Thought I'd see how you were doing."

"You mean Anson Horne wanted to see what I was up to, don't you."

He shrugged and looked past me to the other end of the valley. "Yep," he said, "I guess it started just about here. Nothing but burned-out stumps this side of the creek bed. Those boys weren't expecting to meet fire between them and the road. They had a radio, but nobody'd reported it.

"Funny thing about fire," he continued. "I like near froze to death once. Never was so glad to see a fire in all my life. It felt like I could just plunge my feet into it up to my knees and it wouldn't hurt me none. Didn't do it," he added, "got more sense."

The floor of the valley sloped upwards from where we were standing. I took a deep breath and started the climb. The stillness of the air had a weight to it, making it hard to pull it into my lungs. It seemed to want to wrap me up the way a spider does before it sucks you dry.

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The dry grass crackled under my feet and broke the spell. The going wasn't bad but the soil was loose. I was taking my time, but a flat-out run would sure be hell. And that's what they were doing, those six boys, a flat-out run, with the fire roaring and howling at their heels.

Hadley stuck to me like glue. We walked for a while without talking before we came to a marker of sorts, a concrete cross about four feet high. It looked out of place in this wild setting.

"There's a cross for every spot where they found a body. Here's where Morris bought it," Hadley commented. "He was only sixteen."

Baumgartner, Dorn, Green, Morris, Torvilson, and Taglia. I knew from my research that Morris had been the first boy to die.

"How d'you know so much?" I inquired.

"Torvilson spent nearly every day for close on to six months at the station. Kept ragging on us to do something. There isn't any little detail I don't know from that man. Morris lied about his age," he continued as if impelled to tell me everything he knew. "This was his first jump."

I looked up the valley and could see four more crosses strung out ahead. Morris had finished last in the race that nobody won. We kept on walking. We were going at a slow pace, but by the time we got to the second cross I was exhausted. The incline that had seemed deceptively gentle at the mouth of the valley was tying the muscles of my legs into knots. At the base of this cross someone had laid flowers. Even in the heat, they still retained their shape.

I thought that Hadley would start a lecture about whichever poor kid this cross represented, but he was silent. I guess he was as breathless as I was.

"Someone's been here," I finally managed to get out, "and not too long ago by the looks of things."

"Torvilson," Hadley muttered. "It's Torvilson's cross," he said in a louder voice. "It doesn't do to dwell so much on the past." He turned on his heel and started back down the valley.

I looked up to the head of the valley, then back at Hadley's retreating form. The shadows had shifted some, and then I saw it. High on the rim of the valley, alone from the rest of the crowd, the sixth cross stood outside the edge of safety. I guess when you're running from red death a miss is as good as a mile.

The folly of man hit me like a blow. The bodies had been taken elsewhere. The entire valley was an empty graveyard of hope. The crosses were cruel reminders that young men don't always get to

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be old ones. My only comfort was that the crosses that disfigured the fire-scarred valley would eventually crumble away. Hadley was right. Sometimes it's best to leave the past alone. "Rest in peace," I whispered and followed the policeman down.

Hadley was out of view when I spotted Ranger Benson lumbering round the bend as I came to the little stand of pines. "Well, isn't this a regular convention here," I called out. Old pasty-face didn't improve on coming close.

"We're conducting a federal investigation here," he snapped at me without preamble. "What are you doing here?"

"This here is a national park, or it was last time I noticed, and I'm a private citizen just enjoying the view."

"I can run you out for disturbing the peace. It would be your word against mine."

"No, it wouldn't," Hadley said. He must've circled back through the pines because he'd come up behind Benson real quiet-like.

"You've got no jurisdiction here," Benson snorted.

"Maybe this says I have," Hadley replied, slapping his holster.

Benson huffed and puffed, but he couldn't seem to get any words out. I stepped between them and said, "Maybe you could give us some general information, you being a forest ranger and we being interested tourists, so to speak."

"Like what?" He eyed me suspiciously.

"Like what's a blowout?"

His chest seemed to swell, and the little toad even took on a superior grin. "A blowout's a firestorm, I thought everybody knew that. The air gets so hot everything bursts into flame. Then the winds whip up because there's a temperature gradient. . . ."

"Speak English," Hadley interrupted. Benson looked offended and I thought he was going to clam up.

"We haven't had your schooling," I interjected.

Darned if the little toad didn't puff up some more.

"If there's cooler air coming in from somewhere, then there's a temperature gradient, a difference between the cool air and the superheated air. The difference causes the hot air to rise, sucking in the cooler air. There's literally a tornado of fire. It's called a firestorm." He grinned. He thought he was lecturing idiots.

"You must know a lot about fires," I prompted.

"I've fought a few. Took care of one all by myself, right here, the day before."

I was confused. "You mean yesterday?" There didn't seem that much left to burn.

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The self-satisfaction seemed to drain from Benson's face. "You ask too many questions," he replied and stumped back off down the trail.

When I got back to my office a woman was waiting for me outside the door. She was wearing a worn, faded dress that looked like it had been washed too many times and she clutched a cheap leatherette handbag with hands that would be a poor ad for Palmolive. They were red and callused, one finger adorned with a wedding ring. She was somebody's hard-working wife.

"Mr. Traveler?" she asked in an anxious kind of voice. I wondered how long she'd been standing there.

"Yes ma'am, were you waiting for me?"

She nodded mutely and I ushered her in. She didn't sit down when I pulled out the client's chair and that left the two of us standing sort of stupid-like in the middle of the room.

"I shouldn't have come," she said and turned as if to go.

That's women for you, never wanting what they have, only what they can't get. "Well, you're here now, ma'am," I said in my softest voice. "It would be a shame to waste all that time you spent waiting for me, wouldn't it?" I could tell she was the kind of woman who hoarded up the minutes and was careless of the years.

After I settled her down, I asked, "Now, ma'am, what can I do for you?"

She dithered some, but finally came out with it. "It's Harold Torvilson, he's going to kill my husband, I know he is." She turned on the waterworks and for a minute I thought I was going to have to give her my only clean handkerchief, but she fumbled in her battered purse and came up with one of her own.

I let her get hold of herself before I continued. "Mrs. Ferguson—it is Mrs. Ferguson?" I asked. Who else was everybody saying Torvilson was getting set to kill, I thought. "What makes you think that Mr. Torvilson is going to kill your husband?"

"He hired you, didn't he?"

That took me back some. "I can assure you, ma'am," I said in my best country-lawyer imitation, "except for the war, I've never killed a man in my life."

"Edgar Benson called. As soon as I picked up the receiver I knew it was trouble. Ed and my Jim haven't spoken for years. I gave the phone to Jim and went over to my neighbor's place as quick as I could. We're on the party line, you know. She let me listen, no questions asked. She's been a good friend to me through all our troubles."

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I let her take her time thinking about her good friend, maybe her only friend about now. In times of trouble women will stick together like glue. Pretty soon she started up again. "Edgar said that Mr. Torvilson had gotten himself a hired gun and that he . . . uh, *you* were coming after my Jim."

The puffed-up toad, why was he stirring things up? I wondered.

"Mr. Traveler, I don't have any money, but please take this." She twisted the gold band from her finger, struggling to get it past her work-swollen knuckle. "It's got to be worth something?"

I put my hand over hers. "Now don't you fuss, ma'am. That ring is worth a whole lot more to you than it is to me. Your man's in no danger, leastways not from me.

"Mr. Torvilson, he's cut up real bad," I continued, "but I don't see him taking the law into his own hands." I hoped I was right. "He asked me to hold a watching brief, make sure things were done right. I'm sure your husband would want the same."

"I can tell you this, he wasn't expecting no fire at Hardscrabble Creek. He had a radio with him and nobody'd reported it."

"Ma'am, I'm sure your man must be waiting supper about now. He's probably worried about where you're at."

"He has bad dreams," she continued. "He calls out in the middle of the night, 'This way, over here.' He told me he can see them, in the dream, the same as real life. They don't listen to him. Every last one of them boys. They go on by. And every last one of them boys got themselves killed and now the blame's on him. Oh, it just isn't fair."

She continued to fuss some, but I assured her that I would come over next day and have a little chat with her husband. I'd been planning to see him anyway.

I closed up the office and shepherded her out. Barney Chester was just putting up the *Evening Telegraph* on the racks of his newsstand as we entered the lobby. I heard a small mewl like a kitten might make and I turned to look at my companion. She was white as a sheet and starting to wobble. Barney rushed over to my side, spilling the remainder of the papers, whose headlines screamed, "Forest Ranger Murdered," as Mrs. Ferguson slid to the floor.

"So I didn't catch her—she's all right, isn't she?" I protested, the following day, to Anson Horne. We were having a cup of java at the Snappy Service lunch stand just up from the police station. Horne preferred talking to me on neutral territory.

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Horne laughed. "You don't have much luck with women, do you, Martin?"

"She had no cause to faint, wasn't even her husband involved."

"Don't blame her much. Who would have thought that Torvilson would get the wrong man? You can't say I didn't try to head you off. You could see that canker working on him. Hiring you must have shoved him over the edge."

"Funny, I don't see it that way. Anson, you're a student of human nature and so am I, and after five years of butting heads with you I think I've got to know you pretty good."

"So?"

"I know you're fiercely loyal to your men. I know you don't like guys like Torvilson yammering that you're not doing your job. So I know that sometimes you put two and two together a little faster than you ought."

Horne took a deep breath and then another one. Since his last heart attack he's been practicing controlled breathing. I probably should have put it to him more roundabout, but Anson's like a mule. You've got to hit him with a two-by-four to get his attention.

"All right," he growled. "Have your say. I know I couldn't stop you anyhow."

"You're right about one thing, Torvilson is the murderer, but not the way you think. He didn't pull the trigger. How about you and Hadley taking Torvilson out for a little ride. Meet me at Hardscrabble about four this afternoon."

He didn't say he would, but he didn't say he wouldn't. And sure enough, when four o'clock rolled around, the three of them were there at the head of the trail.

The heat of the day was still clinging to the stones, and the scent of pine sap from the few remaining trees perfumed the air. It wasn't till we reached the head of the valley that you could smell the lingering acrid scent of ash. Horne had been pretty patient with me up until now, but I could tell he was getting set to dig in his heels.

I stopped and said, "Okay, gentlemen, what do you see?" The shadows were lengthening and the crosses caught the sun in golden relief.

Red was quiet and Horne looked at me like I was mad, but Torvilson took a deep breath and said, "My son's cross is high up the rim of the valley," just like nobody else had died there.

"Six crosses," I answered, "and your son's the farthest one out. Right?"

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"He was a fast runner. He was the star of his high-school track team."

"And how about your boy, Red?" I asked softly.

"Don't have a boy, never did," he answered.

"But your wife did. And you raised him as your own, up in Idaho, didn't you."

Red lit out, not back toward the road, but up the valley, mimicking the six who had died there. I knew his heart was pounding and his muscles were straining, but there was no fire behind him, only Anson Horne.

The Chief of Police did nothing.

"Aren't you going to shoot him?" Torvilson demanded.

"You're a bloodthirsty son of a gun, aren't you?" Anson retorted. I noticed he was taking deep breaths. "You kept pouring acid on him every day." He turned to me. "How'd you find out?"

"I met Hadley here yesterday. I thought he was following me on your orders. In fact, he'd been laying flowers at his boy's cross. He made a bad mistake telling me that cross marked where Torvilson's boy had gone down. Still, it's no crime not wanting someone else knowing your business. It was when Benson got killed instead of Ferguson that I knew he had to be guilty."

"Look here," Anson interjected. "I knew about the kid when Red brought his family down from Idaho. He didn't like to talk about it, just wanted to make a fresh start. Get the past behind him. He was doing just fine until you started coming around." He poked Torvilson in the chest.

"All I wanted was justice," Torvilson retorted.

"And you got it, kind of. Benson let slip that he'd put a fire out the day before the big blowup. He'd never reported it. It must have started to dawn on him that we'd noticed the slip. He tried to muddy the waters, but it was already too late. Hadley was faster than me in figuring out that Benson had committed two sins. He hadn't reported the fire, and he'd done a sloppy job of putting it out. It must have smoldered all night. By morning it had flared up again and closed off the road."

Torvilson interrupted, "He's getting away."

Anson looked at him with cold blue eyes. "We're on federal territory. I have no jurisdiction here."

We looked up the valley at Hadley struggling up the rim of the valley. He'd reached the cross that marked the spot where the fastest kid had lost the race. He struggled on by without stopping, but I knew that safety was beyond his reach. ●

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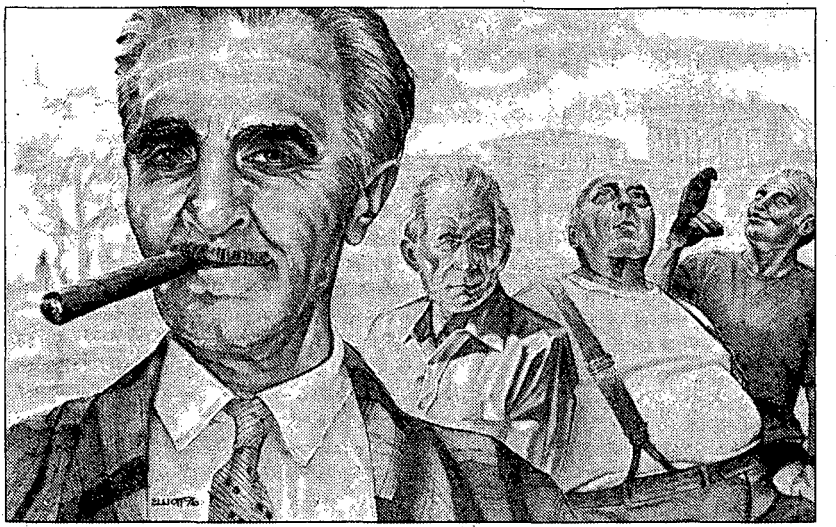

Art by Darryll Elliott

HARD TIMES

by Barbara Owens

They looked out of place in a busy squad room accustomed to society's dregs—four elderly men aligned on a bench, plainly but neatly dressed. Becker came back from the front desk, said they'd informed him they wanted to speak to a detective and that it was none of his business what it was about.

Hank Skovich cupped his swollen jaw and eyed them sourly. "Looks like a senility lineup. Give them to somebody else."

"Nobody else available right now," Becker responded cheerfully. "They're all yours."

Terry Hacker was studying the old men with amused interest. "I think I've seen them before. Aren't they the old guys who stake out one of those benches in the park down the street?"

"I don't know," Skovich sighed. "Okay, Becker, send them back."

They came in single file. Skovich and Hacker pulled four side chairs into a semicircle around their facing desks and the old

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men sat, straight and smiling. Hacker made the introductions. One of the four, a balding gentleman with a sharp chin, nodded and cleared his throat.

"We'll hold onto our names, if it's all the same to you, until we see how you boys take to what we've got to say," he announced in a whiskey voice. "Then if you don't see things our way, we're outta here and nobody's the worse for it, know what I mean?"

Skovich shifted irritably. "Sir, if you have information regarding a crime, that's what we're here for. Let's don't waste time."

A former Edgar Award winner, and an *EQMM* Department of First Stories author, Barbara Owens has been featured regularly in *EQMM* since 1978. The Skovich and Hacker detecting team, however, is of relatively recent origin. The idea for the forty-something Skovich and his young partner Hacker came to Ms. Owens in 1992 and hasn't let go of her since. †

The old man's eyes were blue and faded, but there was still a sparkle there. He gave Skovich a sympathetic grin.

"Got a bad toothache, haven't you, sonny? Looks like you feel rotten. Well, be glad you still got your own. Just have it dug out, did you?"

Skovich winced at the thought, but found himself muttering, "Wisdom tooth. Going to come out as soon as the infection lets go."

The old man tsked and his three friends nodded with understanding. Skovich suddenly felt a little more kindly. "So what can we do for you?"

The old man leaned forward eagerly, grasping the desk's edge with both hands. "We want to let you know about a crime. Hasn't happened yet but it's gonna. The bank on Central, just around the corner, is gonna be robbed."

"You mean Citizens Bank?" Hacker asked.

"That's the one. Gonna get hit."

Skovich cocked an eyebrow. Another harmless crank. "When's this going to happen?" he asked. "And how is it that you know about it?"

"Gonna be Thursday," the old man answered. "Or Friday. It depends."

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Suddenly another voice—the old duffer with the polka-dot tie. "P.T., I told you I can't do it Thursday," he protested in a mushy stage whisper. "My daughter's coming up that day."

The sharp-chinned man stiffened, whipping toward him. "Shut up, Marsh! Now look what you've done. This is all for you, you damn fool!"

The detectives exchanged looks. The corner of Hacker's mouth twitched. "You men are going to rob the bank?"

P.T. threw up his hands and slumped back in his chair. "Well, you screwed it up, Marsh, just like I knew you would. Didn't I say let me do the talking?" He exhaled a long sigh. "Okay, officers, here's the story. I'm P.T., the bigmouth is Marsh, that's John on the end, and this fat one here is Sid."

Sid lunged to his feet to shake the detectives' hands. Sid had a hot glint in his eye. "It was my idea," he announced loudly.

P.T. said, "Sit down, Sid," and Sid sat. P.T. sighed again. "Now we're not crooks, not a one of us, and we got a reason for this. That's why we're here. Detectives, we got to get Marsh some new teeth. He broke his old ones and he can't hardly eat a thing. So we figured out how much new ones is gonna cost and that's all we're gonna steal, right down to the penny."

He fished into his jacket and pulled out a wrinkled slip of paper. Fascinated, the pain in his jaw all but forgotten, Skovich took it.

"And we'll pay it back as fast as we can," P.T. went on. "But our problem is, we're not as young as we used to be, know what I mean? And we don't want anybody getting hurt, least of all us if we're a tad slow making our getaway. So we figured if we told you about it first, you might let us go on and do it without shooting us dead. Or sending us to the pen. That's no place for men our age." He was smiling, clearly pleased with his reasoning. "So what do you say? We got us a deal?"

The detectives were momentarily speechless. Skovich finally roused himself. "Now look here," he began, "we can't make a deal like that. What you're proposing is a crime, no matter how old you are."

P.T. slumped again. His lip curled. "Then I guess we'll just have to take our chances, boys," he said. "Our men in blue are heartless when it comes to the common comforts of life."

"I've seen you all before," Hacker put in. "You live around here, don't you?"

Sid tilted forward, eyes burning. "The Cozy Corners Retirement

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Home," he spat out. "How'd you like to live in a place called Cozy Corners?"

"Never mind, Sid," P.T. advised wearily. "They don't care. Try to be a good citizen and this is what you get."

"Wait a minute," Skovich protested, wondering why he felt guilty. "Surely you men have pensions and health care of some sort. There must be another way to get money for the teeth."

"Well, sure there is," P.T. snapped, shooting erect again. "That's already in the works. But, you see, this is the second set Marsh has busted this year. You don't know yet, sonny, but it's hard times when you get old. Lose your sayso. Other people tell you what's gonna happen to you. Yeah, Marsh'll get his new teeth but nobody's in a hurry about it. It's drug on now for a coupla months and no end in sight. I tell you, there's not many pleasures left when you get this old, but eating is one of them and Marsh is real partial to that." Marsh grinned agreement, baring naked pink gums.

"Now I know he ought to cut out hard candy and cracking his choppers on it," P.T. said. "But seems to me a man ain't a man unless he can make his own decisions, know what I mean?"

Everyone was silent for a moment. "Maybe we can come up with another way," Skovich said finally. "You men don't really want to rob a bank, do you?"

Sid shot forward. "I do!"

"Well," P.T. said, "I have to admit it sounded like fun. Break the monotony, you know."

"I've got a cousin who's a dentist," Hacker volunteered. "Maybe we can work something out with him."

Skovich stood up. "Good idea. Come on back to the lunchroom for coffee and donuts. Let my partner make a call."

The old men rose in unison. "No coffee for me, thanks," P.T. announced. "I've drunk an ocean of it in my time, but these days it makes my eyes bug out. I never turn down a donut, though. Whaddaya say, Marsh? You can gum a donut, can't you?"

And they followed after Skovich and Hacker in single file.

The deal was arranged with Hacker's dentist cousin and everyone but Sid looked relieved. The gathering turned festive. The partners learned that all four men were in their late seventies. P.T. had worked the docks, Sid trained boxers, Marsh labored for the railroad, and John had been a nurseryman. John also didn't talk.

"Well, he does sometimes," P.T. explained. "But mostly he's

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already said everything he has to say in this life." John, munching donuts, nodded seriously.

They spent most of their time on the park bench to keep up on what was going on in the world. "Betcha we know more what's doing in the neighborhood than you boys do," P.T. boasted, and the partners had to agree he was probably right.

They were clearly delighted to be in such close proximity to the excitement of police work.

"You working on that lady who got killed in her apartment on Towne Place?" P.T. inquired, chin quivering. Skovich said they were.

"We heard it was like a burglary gone bad," P.T. offered. The detectives were evasive and P.T.'s eyes began to spark. "We saw that lady walking her dog every day. Marsh had a kind of crush on her. She seemed nice. Ugly dog, though." His chest expanded visibly. "Anything we can do to help you boys out, anytime, just say the word. I figure we owe you now."

"Okay," Skovich said without enthusiasm. "That would be great."

Sid, depressed because the bank job had fallen through, suddenly brightened. "We could keep an eye out, feed you stuff. Like—what do they call them, P.T.? We've seen them on TV."

"Snitches!" P.T. crowed. "Hey, we can be your snitches. How'd that be?"

The detectives exchanged helpless looks. "We can always use information," Skovich said lamely.

When the men departed, single file, the partners watched them go. "The Hard Times Boys," Skovich mused with real affection. "A real over-the-hill gang if I ever saw one."

"And you know," Hacker responded cheerfully, "that could be you one of these days."

Skovich's mood continued downward towards glum as he and Hacker ventured out for lunch. He kept seeing himself with a sharp grizzled jaw and bare gums.

"Don't forget your medicine," Hacker reminded while they waited for their burritos and refried beans to arrive.

"I don't want to take the damned medicine."

"Then don't take it." Hacker smiled cheerfully. "Walk around with an infected tooth, I don't care."

After a respectably defiant moment, Skovich took his medicine. "You ever worry about getting old, Terry?"

"Naw," Hacker said.

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Skovich glanced at his partner's smooth young face, his plentiful blond hair, and snapped, "No, I guess you wouldn't, would you, punk? You're barely out of diapers. Think you'll live forever. Well, trust me, kid, senility will be on you before you know it. It's breathing down my neck right now."

Hacker grinned on, unruffled. "Hank, you're forty years old and all you've got is a toothache. You'll probably last another year or two, so get off my case, okay?"

The jalapeños arrived, hot enough to paralyze everything in him, pounding tooth included. Skovich brightened. "I guess you're right," he admitted sheepishly. "Every male ancestor I know of lived past ninety and kept most of the sense he was born with. I won't give up yet."

The conversation soon turned towards Hacker's love life. Skovich had grown resigned to the parade of women. Each was trumpeted to be The One, and each eventually drifted off into memory. Sometimes it puzzled Hacker.

"I really want to settle down and have a family," he had confessed during one long dark night on stakeout. "I had a good one growing up, so I have no hangups. But it's a big thing, you know? What if I make a mistake? Get hooked up and The One is just around the corner?"

The current applicant was Pam, a travel agent, and over lunch they agreed that her occupation was a definite plus.

"All those cut-rate vacations," Hacker enthused through nachos. "The Alps, the Far East. Egypt. Always wanted to ride a camel through Egypt. She might even swing something for you. Where's the one place you'd like to go?"

"Omaha," Skovich grinned after a moment's thought. "Jet me off to Omaha."

Hacker had to laugh. "Sorry, can't do that. Hank Skovich let loose in his Bermuda shorts and long black socks. That would offend Omaha."

And with that vision shimmering in their minds, the partners went back to work.

Lorena Miner had lived on the second floor of an ageing four-story building. She was a widow with no children and no close family. Her income had been adequate but not plentiful. Everyone who knew her liked her, a quiet elderly lady with simple tastes. She had been friendly but not careless; all her acquaintances assured the authorities that she would never permit a stranger to enter

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her apartment. Yet there had been no signs of forced entry when her body was found. The front door, however, was unlocked.

The detectives were sure it was a case of interrupted burglary. Jewelry and small items were missing from the apartment. Also cash from her purse, although her two credit cards were left untouched. Mrs. Miner was wearing a coat and had been strangled with her muffler.

"Came back from walking the dog," Skovich speculated, "and surprised the guy inside."

Hacker agreed. "Why else would the dog still be trailing his leash?"

"A lot of lowlifes around preying on older women living alone."

"Yeah, but how did he manage to get inside?"

Rich and Tina Caputo had been Mrs. Miner's next-door neighbors. They were graduate students at the local university and were absent when the first round of police interviews were done. Rich Caputo buzzed the detectives into the small barren lobby and opened the door to 2C when they knocked. He was a tall, earnest-looking young man with shaggy hair and glasses. His wife was in class, he said.

"Just checking the neighbors again to see if we can come up with something," Skovich told him. "I understand you were gone when the police came around before."

Caputo wore the frazzled expression of a stressed student, but he looked Skovich directly in the eye. "We were out of town all that week. My wife's father died, and we went home for the funeral. You can check that out." He shrugged at Skovich's quizzical look. "I assume everyone's a suspect until the guy is caught."

He and his wife had lived in the building just under a year and knew Mrs. Miner only slightly. "We're on campus most of the time so we didn't see her that much. She seemed nice, very quiet, hardly knew she was there." He had been inside her apartment twice, both times to carry groceries for her when they met coming into the building.

"She have many visitors?"

"Like I said, we're gone most of the time. Have you talked to Mrs. Halloran? She's on the first floor somewhere and they were pretty good friends, I think, so she could probably tell you more than I can."

The detectives asked about the security in the building. Caputo said it was okay for its age. "You need a key to get into the lobby. There are two back doors in the basement, but the management's

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pretty good about keeping them locked. You can get outside if you need to but no one can get in."

"Unless they've been buzzed in from the lobby," Hacker reminded him.

"Yeah, that's true. Once you're inside you've got the run of the place."

"That happen often? You get people going door to door?" Skovich was thinking of Mickey Wise, whose specialty was foisting nonexistent insurance policies on the elderly and gullible. Every time they put him away he popped back out again and took up where he left off. Mickey was out now, he recalled.

But Caputo said, "Not to my door. Mostly students and older people live here because of the low rents. Nobody's got much money, and we're all pretty careful. We know everyone in the place, at least by sight. It's nice and quiet. Don't have much traffic going in and out."

"How about parties, Rich? You let off steam now and then when the pressure gets too high?"

Caputo allowed himself a small smile. "We've had a few friends over, sure, but no time or money for parties, man."

"Mind giving me a list of these friends?"

With the list in hand, the detectives thanked him and left, passing the yellow police tape across the door of 2B.

"Anything?" Skovich asked.

Hacker said, "Don't think so. How about you?"

"No. Alibi's too good. But it might pay us to look into the friends."

Mae Halloran opened the door with one hand firmly gripping a cane and a fierce-faced white cat cuddled in her other arm. She gazed up at them from under fluffy gray bangs and said, "Oh, I didn't expect you to be so big!"

She ushered them into a small overstuffed living room and planted them side by side on a sofa, lowering herself into a facing chair and transferring the cat to her lap. The cat glared at Skovich and hissed.

"Stop that, Lovey," Mrs. Halloran admonished. "You'll have to excuse her, I'm afraid. She doesn't make friends."

She wasn't sure how much she could help them. She had already told the first officers everything she knew.

"I found her, you know. We were supposed to watch a certain television program together, and when she didn't come down I called her, but she didn't answer." She sighed. "At our age you

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never know what will happen, so I took the elevator up to see if she was all right. When I found the door unlocked I knew something was wrong. Lorena never left her door open. So I just peeked in a little and . . . well, I saw her lying there. I didn't go all the way in. I couldn't. I came right back here and called the police." Her eyes filled. "Poor Lorena. She was such a good friend. For twelve years. I'm sure going to miss her."

"I know you've been asked this before," Hacker said gently, "but can you think of anyone who might have done this?"

"No sir, I can't. Most of us older folks here don't socialize much except with each other. Lorena was more independent. She tried to get out and about as much as she could. I went with her sometimes, but she was more able than me, you see." She thumped her cane hard on the floor as if to punish it. The cat spat at Skovich again. He gave it a baleful look and got one in return. Hacker grinned.

The old woman reinforced Rich Caputo's contention that people off the street were not a problem in the building. One time, years ago, a man came through pretending to be a repairman, but no one let him in. She heard later that he'd been arrested and put in jail.

"We're not that old or foolish. No one would let a stranger into their apartment. And Lorena most certainly wouldn't have. She was very careful, Lorena was." Her eyes moistened again.

"Maybe it was someone she knew," Skovich suggested. The white cat seemed to sneer.

"The thing is, she didn't know that many people outside this building. All her family was gone, you know. That's why she and I kind of took care of one another. I have a son but he doesn't live close-by, so we made up our own little family. Lorena ran errands for me when she was out—that's if my leg wasn't up to going with her. And when she was in the hospital a few days last year getting some tests I took care of Butch for her. Went up and fed him, played with him to keep him from getting lonesome. I would have brought him down here but he and Lovey don't get along." She smoothed the white cat's fur. "It wasn't Butch's fault, it was Lovey's. She didn't take to Butch at all."

Meeting the cat's cold green eyes, Skovich wasn't at all surprised.

"They took Butch to the pound," Mrs. Halloran said with a catch in her voice. "I expect he got a good home, don't you?"

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"I'm sure he did," Hacker said quickly, before Skovich could open his honest mouth.

She was hugging the cat now, tears beginning to fall.

"I certainly hope you catch the man. Lorena never hurt a soul. Just watched television and read her books. She did lovely needlepoint. Do you know—" She cleared her throat. "Did you know he took the rings right off her fingers? Who would do a thing like that?"

After receiving her promise that she would call if she remembered anything else, the partners eased themselves from the apartment and into their car. While Skovich gulped a couple of antacids Hacker observed quietly, "This is a good neighborhood. Fairly low crime rate. A nice old lady should feel safe living here. If we're lucky enough to catch this guy, I think I'd like to impress that on him before we take him in. Inflict some pain, you know? That might make me feel good."

"That's police brutality," Skovich told him. "I'd have to stop it if I saw it."

"I never said I'd do it. Just said I'd like to."

"And I said *if* I saw it. I never said I'd be looking right at you."

The first item on the agenda for the following morning was to track down Mickey Wise.

"Mickey's never hurt anyone before," Skovich reasoned, "just ran his insurance scams and disappeared. But who knows what he might do if given the opportunity?"

Hacker looked dubious. "I don't have my heart set on him, but it's worth a shot."

As they rounded the corner of the station, heading for their car, a sharp "Psst!" brought them up short, tensing. Hands dropping towards holsters, they swung to see P.T. stepping from the shrubbery.

Skovich relaxed. "Oh God," he muttered. "Again?"

The old man was alone and beaming. "Bet you thought we'd forgot, didn't you? Nossir, we talked it over last night and here's what we came up with. I told you, we kept an eye on this lady because Marsh thought she was cute. Okay, she walked her dog every day between four and four-thirty. Sharp. Always took the same route — down Piedmont, through the park, back up Piedmont, got it? She had her hair done every Tuesday at the Hair Today beauty parlor on Copeland. Might turn up somebody suspicious there, you think? She bought her groceries on Friday from

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the U-Save Market on Rochester, and every coupla weeks she went to the library on Willow. She carried her books in a little bag with the name of the library on it. Oh yeah, and Sid says to tell you there's been a ratty-looking guy in the park a few times lately. Little fella with greasy dark hair and a leather jacket that says 'More Power' on it." He leaned towards them eagerly. "You got all that? You didn't write it down."

Skovich tried not to smile, wondering what undercover vice cop Overfelt would say if he knew he'd just been turned in.

"I got it up here," he said seriously, tapping his temple. "Doesn't pay to write too much down. You never know. And stay away from the guy in the park. We know about him. We're watching him."

"Well, that's good," P.T. said. He glanced nervously over each shoulder. "Not too safe to be seen together, I guess. Someone might catch on. I'd better get going." He wagged a warning finger under Hacker's nose. "You got a good boss here. Pay attention to him. That's how you learn things, understand?"

Hacker blinked. "He's not my—" he began.

"Thanks, P.T.," Skovich broke in smoothly. "Don't worry about him. He's a good one. Catches on fast."

"We'll let you know when we got more," P.T. said, and he was gone, scuttling along the side of the building. Skovich turned back towards their car.

"You're not my boss," Hacker complained, falling into step. "Why'd you let him think that?"

"Hey, what difference does it make?" Skovich grinned. "It was an honest mistake. He could obviously see I have an air of authority about me."

Hacker snorted. "Or could obviously see that you're the old guy."

"Wasn't it just yesterday you were telling me I'm only forty and all that crap?"

Hacker shouldered him aside and slid into the driver's seat. "I try to stay flexible in my thinking," he said. "Pick a side and I'll be on it."

They tracked Mickey Wise to a deli on Broad Street. Mickey was young, brash, and charming, adept at parting senior citizens from their hard-earned dollars for insurance policies that never materialized. In his past, Mickey had even been known to convince at least one elderly widow to insure her precious parakeet for an astounding sum. Mickey was enjoying a corned beef on rye when

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they arrived, and he didn't object when the partners slid into his booth to join him.

"How's the insurance business, Mickey?" Skovich greeted him.

The boyish shine dimmed in Mickey's eyes. "I'm out of that business, detective, sir," he answered earnestly. "I've learned my lesson. I'm working for my uncle in the trucking business now. You're looking at a solid citizen and I owe it all to you two."

"Well, that's swell," Skovich said. "You haven't by any chance been visiting friends at 1012 Towne Place recently, have you?"

Mickey swallowed carefully before replying. "Hey, I know what happened there. Some poor old woman got killed. Don't look to me for that. Even back when I was a bad guy I never hurt anyone. It's not in me."

"Thanks for the testimonial," Hacker told him. "But humor us, okay? Where were you a week ago Thursday? All day."

Mickey's smile was more of a smirk. "Well, you'll pardon me if I spare you the details, but I was on my honeymoon. I got married the Sunday before that and my sweet bride and I went to Hawaii for a week. Check it out. I told you, I'm a changed man."

Mickey's story held. The airline confirmed passage, and the hotel in Hawaii had them registered in the bridal suite for eight days. Faxed pictures of Mickey were identified as the proud bridegroom.

Hacker sighed. "Oh well, he'll be coming back to us one of these days anyway."

"Oh yeah," Skovich agreed. "He's got two mouths to feed now."

The initial interviews with tenants in Mrs. Miner's building had come up with a record for one. His name was Darcy Lundgren, and he'd been convicted some years past for an assault on an elderly woman because her dog persisted in using Lundgren's yard as a public facility. It didn't sound too promising, but the partners went to see him anyway. He had, after all, landed the woman in the hospital.

Lundgren turned out to be an ageing, soft-spoken man, partially blind.

"I knew her from the building, sure, but I never said more than hello to her," he told them.

"How about her dog? We understand you don't like dogs very much."

Lundgren sighed. "That was a long time ago. I had a drinking problem back then, lost my wife and kids because of it. I've been sober for almost twenty years now. I've got a good pension and I

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mind my own business. Ask anyone who knows me. I'm not the same man I used to be."

They believed him. "Too many bad guys reforming on us," Skovich groused on their way back to the car. "Keep this up and we'll be out of a job."

Nothing was opening up on this case, so for the next few days the partners occupied themselves with others. Hacker was pleased that Skovich's tooth continued to improve.

"You know, I think I'm going to pull you through this case all in one piece," he beamed. "Maybe your bad luck is over."

Skovich munched an antacid. "Let's go back and talk to Mrs. Halloran again," he suggested. "She's the closest link we've got to Lorena Miner. Maybe we can help her to remember something she forgot."

Four old men rose in unison from their park bench to hail them as the detectives cruised past. Skovich reluctantly stopped the car and they clustered at its windows.

"I know it's risky to be seen talking to you," P.T. said, "but we just remembered this morning seeing that lady walking with someone a coupla times. Some young guy. Don't know if it means anything, but she was usually by herself unless the lady with the cane was with her."

"Did it look like he was harassing her?"

"No, they was talking friendly." P.T. bobbed eagerly.

"How we doing? Is that a good tip?"

"Could be," Skovich answered cautiously. "What did this guy look like?"

The old men conferred a minute. "Not too tall," P.T. announced. "Nowhere near as big as you boys. Early twenties prob'ly, light hair. Got a round face, kind of soft-looking. Walked hunched over with his hands in his pockets." The others nodded affirmation. "Wore some kind of dark jacket, kind of like a letter jacket. Dark blue or gray, I think it was."

"Okay, thanks," Skovich said. "We'll get on it."

Marsh leaned close to Hacker's window and bared his gums.

"Gonna get my new teeth this afternoon," he mumbled. "Really appreciate what you done."

"My pleasure," Hacker assured him. "But lay off the hard candy now, will you? Try something soft instead."

Mrs. Halloran seemed pleased to see them. The white cat did not. When Skovich asked her if she'd go through Mrs. Miner's apartment with them, her eyes clouded.

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"Do I have to? I did that with the first officers and it was hard. It's so empty and cold there without Lorena."

"You'd be helping us out, Mrs. Halloran. And helping Mrs. Miner, too. She'd want us to find the man who did this."

"I know she would. Poor Lorena. All right, I'll go."

Once inside the empty apartment, she proceeded on tiptoe. "It was always so warm and friendly in here," she murmured. "Lorena would be over there sewing by the window or we'd have tea. I just can't bear to think . . ." Her voice trailed away.

"Anything you can remember, any little thing," Hacker encouraged her.

They were in the kitchen. The old woman nodded. "I'll try, but I already told everything I could think of. I don't know what else—" She stopped.

"Mrs. Halloran?"

She was gazing at the phone on the kitchen wall. A puzzled frown grew. "I just noticed," she said. "Her keys. See that little hook on the wall beside the phone? Lorena had an extra set of keys hanging there. She got them after she mislaid hers one day and took forever to find them. Said she was getting so absentminded that she needed another set. Now look—they're gone. I swear, I didn't notice that before. Do you think—did one of your men take them?"

"No, ma'am," Skovich said, his gut beginning a slow dance. "Were they hanging there when you were in here before, the day it happened?"

"I'm not sure, but I don't think—no, I don't believe they were." Her eyes grew wide and frightened. "Maybe that's how he got in."

"Then it would have to be someone who'd been in here before," Hacker said. "Who could that have been?"

Mrs. Halloran's hands fluttered. "I don't know! Lorena was always so careful. Mrs. Robertson and I visited, and that young Mr. Caputo helped her with her groceries a time or two. And the boy from the library was here. Besides that, I—"

"What boy from the library?" Skovich cut in sharply.

She stared up at him. "There was a young man worked at the library. Lorena mentioned he was so nice and friendly. She went there often, you know, loved to read. And she told me he brought books a few times when the weather was too bad for her to go out." Her voice began to tremble. "She thought it was so considerate." At the question in the detectives' eyes, she whispered, "I don't know a thing about him. I don't remember if she even men-

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tioned his name." Her gaze was drawn back to the empty hook on the wall. "But the keys were always there, right in plain sight."

The librarian was a plain young woman who eyed Hacker with appreciation.

"Of course I know who you mean. Reese Baldwin. He's a student at the university, worked here part time. Shelved books, helped out wherever we needed him. Reese was really good with the older people. And he did take books to Mrs. Miner sometimes. We're not supposed to do that, you know, but she was such a regular patron I knew I didn't have to worry about her returning them."

"You're talking about him in the past tense," Skovich said. "Isn't he here?"

"As a matter of fact, he quit this week. Said it was too much for him on top of his study load. We'll miss him; he was a big help."

"I wonder if we could have his address," Hacker suggested.

"Is Reese in trouble?"

"We just want to talk to him, ma'am," he assured her with a smile.

"Please," she protested, coloring. "I'm not old enough to be called ma'am."

Armed with the address, they sped for their car, Hacker still wearing his smile.

"You can wipe that off now," Skovich informed him darkly. "Doesn't do a damn thing for me."

No one was home at Baldwin's apartment. They left a note requesting him to call and went back to the station. Once satisfied that Baldwin had no prior record, Skovich pulled the strings necessary to get a copy of his driver's license photo and Hacker contacted the university. Reese Baldwin was a registered undergraduate but, according to his class schedule, he was probably not on campus that afternoon.

"What's your gut saying?" Hacker inquired while they waited for the license photo to come through.

"Saying it's a good possible. He walked the dog with her. Knew her routine, when she'd be out of the apartment."

"Yeah. I think we just struck gold. Hope so. Sure would like to get my hands on him."

"Easy now."

"I'm a big boy, Hank. I know the rules."

Late afternoon and Baldwin had not called. The picture came through and they headed for the park bench. Before they could get

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to the business at hand, however, they had to admire Marsh's new teeth. Then the old men huddled over Reese Baldwin's photo and immediately agreed that he was the man they'd seen walking with Lorena Miner.

"Got a face like a cherub," Sid snarled. "Wouldn't mind getting a piece of him myself."

"We helped then, didn't we?" P.T. was elated. "We're good snitches?"

Skovich was beginning to feel the adrenalin flow. It made him expansive. "Too early to tell yet, but if this turns out we'll see that you four get some kind of departmental recognition for it."

The old men shouldered one another like a gang of boys. "So what do you do now?" Sid's hot eyes were steaming. "You going after him?"

"We'll take it from here," Skovich advised them. "Thanks for all you've done. You'll be hearing from us, okay?"

They parked across the street and a half block away from Reese Baldwin's apartment. The sky was fast losing light. Skovich was hungry, and they were discussing which one would go for a quick food run when Hacker said, "Look. Someone's coming out of his building."

He was walking away from them, shoulders hunched, hands in pockets. "That's him," Skovich said. "Let's go."

They were across the street and still some lengths behind him when a small group of people rounded the corner beyond Baldwin and started towards him.

Hacker groaned. "God, it's P.T. and the gang."

"What?" Skovich said. "How did they find—"

Just then Marsh raised his arm and waved. Baldwin slowed, looked behind him, and saw the detectives. Skovich and Hacker broke into a trot.

"Reese Baldwin?" Skovich called. "Police! Stay where you are. We want to talk to you."

Baldwin seemed confused. He looked at them, then at P.T. and his friends fast advancing. He fell into a half-crouch.

"Stay away from me!" he shouted.

Hacker said, "We'll have to take him."

Before the words were completely out of his mouth, Baldwin broke for the nearest alley. P.T. and his men, who were closer, stepped up their pursuit. Everyone converged at the opening, and suddenly John lunged from P.T.'s pack and flung himself into Baldwin. Both men went down. But John stayed down, while

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Baldwin struggled to his feet and disappeared into the darkening alley. Hacker sprinted after him. Skovich lingered long enough to see that John was trying to sit up, blood oozing from his forehead where he had hit the cement.

"You all right?" Skovich barked.

John grinned a woozy grin. "That felt good," he said.

"Stay here! All of you, stay here!" Skovich ordered and sped off after his partner. Immediately there were footsteps behind him. "I said, stay there!" he shouted over his shoulder, but the footsteps continued and there was no time to stop and enforce his order. Baldwin was getting away. Cursing hotly, he hissed ahead to Hacker, "Don't shoot, Terry, don't shoot. There's old guys all over the place."

"I don't think I'll have to," Hacker hissed back. "He must not be armed or he'd have fired by now. Can you see him?"

The alley dead-ended into a parking area. It was half full of cars and Baldwin was crouched, zigzagging between them, headed for the high chain-link fence enclosing it. "Police!" Skovich shouted again. "Stay where you are, Baldwin. Don't make us shoot."

He saw a blur of movement, and Baldwin wailed, "Leave me alone! I didn't mean to do it, it was an accident! She came home too soon, you understand? I didn't mean to!"

They lost sight of him momentarily, then he burst from the farthest row of cars and hurled himself at the fence. The detectives plunged after him and they were on the fence together, heaving up by sheer willpower, clawing desperately for grip. Hacker caught hold of a pant leg and got kicked in the face. He slipped, clutching at Skovich for purchase. The detectives hung together for scant seconds, steadying themselves, while Baldwin continued to haul his way up the fence. They were at least eight feet off the ground, the old men below them, cheering them on.

"I didn't mean to," Baldwin was whimpering softly. "Give me a break, okay? It wasn't my fault!"

He was close to the top of the fence, but he was tiring, and he was crying now, great snuffling sobs. His foot slipped and he clung for a moment only by his hands. They were on him then, one close on each side, arms locked across his back, pinning him to the fence. And Baldwin gave up. He sagged, letting the fence go, allowing his full weight to bear on them and their own precarious hold on the fence.

"Hang on, damn you!" Hacker grunted, and Skovich managed, "Don't drop him, Terry!"

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"We heard him say he did it," P.T.'s voice floated up from below. "We heard the whole thing. We're witnesses!"

"Get out of the way down there!" Skovich bawled down as the combined weight of the men on the fence began to droop toward gravity. "Terry? You hear me? Don't drop him!"

They went down together, sprawling onto the concrete with a resounding thud. Hacker was up instantly, rolling Baldwin onto his face in the dirt and cuffing his hands behind him.

"You're under arrest!" he announced as the old men crowded around to watch.

Baldwin was still sobbing. "You don't understand. I needed the money. You don't know how hard it is to get an education these days. I never meant to hurt her."

"You'll get a chance to tell us all about your hard times," Hacker promised him. "I can't wait to hear."

P.T. was jigging up and down. "You boys do good work. By God, made me proud to be part of it!"

Hacker squatted beside Skovich, still sprawled half-sitting against the fence. "That was real teamwork up there, partner." He leaned close in the dusk. "We held him and we got him."

Skovich eyed him pleasantly. "Like to have a little talk with you, Terry. Remember up there? Remember hearing me say don't drop him?"

Hacker looked puzzled. "I didn't drop him. We all came down together."

"Oh no. I distinctly felt you drop him, even after I asked you not to. Wanted to inflict pain, you said, if we caught him."

"But he's not hurt, Hank. Little shook up, but you saw me. I never laid a hand on him."

"Inflict some pain. Well, you did. Forget about me getting through the toothache. You dropped him, Terry. On my foot." Sadly, he indicated his left one. "I'm pretty sure it's broken."

Hacker sat down hard on the cement. "Aw, jeez."

"Try to remember the next time," Skovich went on patiently. "Listen when I tell you something, that's all I ask. Just listen, okay?" ●

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The Sleepwalker

by Donald Olson

In this age of the personal computer few authors remain who still work on a typewriter. When *EQMM* asked Donald Olson for a computer disk and an extra "hard copy" of his latest story, we discovered that the author works on the machine he's been using for decades and keeps only a carbon copy of the work. It seems fitting that Mr. Olson should do so, for his stories have an old-world charm.

Lyman Fox is dead. As I read his lengthy obituary in the *Times,* replete with fulsome testimonials to his worthiness, I recalled with a mix of emotions our last visit together.

"You're looking well, James," he'd said, and might have added, as the less tactful often do, "for your age."

I'd been an occasional patient of Lyman's for about two years, having sought him out for some trifling ailment. I'd cultivated his friendship and shared the infrequent drink or dinner whenever I was in town and he could spare the time from his busy practice and active social life.

I'd invited Lyman to dinner at a little Italian restaurant not far from his office, and once seated I said, "There's something I'd like to show you, but first, if it won't bore you too much, I'd like to tell you a little story from my past."

Lyman Fox had a confident, incisive way of speaking that went with his mature good looks and faultless grooming. "Bore me? No chance, old boy. I know hardly anything about you. Most of my patients can't wait to tell me their life stories, often at grueling length."

"I'll spare you that," I promised. It was true, Lyman knew little about me aside from my being a retired college professor who spent most of my time at my cottage upstate. I hadn't wanted to

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say anything about the subject that had occupied my mind for so long until I felt certain I wasn't riding a lame hobbyhorse; it now seemed pointless to delay any longer.

I proceeded to tell him about my family, who had been very poor indeed, with little time or inclination for anything beyond the struggle to make ends meet, especially at the tail end of the Depression, the period of which I was speaking; circumstances being as they were, I'd had no hope whatsoever of realizing my ambition to go to college. At that time scholarships were not so readily available as they are now.

"One summer day," I said, "soon after my high school graduation, a big black car—Packard, as I recall—pulled up in front of our little house on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. The chauffeur opened the door for a tiny gray-haired lady who marched up onto the porch where I was helping my mother shell peas for our supper. I can still remember the lilac pattern of the woman's dress and her wide-brimmed white straw hat. She introduced herself and told us why she was calling.

" 'As you may know,' she said, 'I'm on the school board. James's teachers have told me all about him. Now I'm a very wealthy woman thanks to my late husband's enterprise, and I like to invest in promising young people. I understand you have no plans for college, James?'

"I was much too shy to say so; my mother was not. 'We know how much James wants to go to college. We know how bright he is. But there's no way on heaven's earth we could afford to send him.'

"The woman nodded. 'Well, that is why I'm here. I'm prepared to underwrite, wholly without obligation, four years' tuition for James at the state university. I hope you'll grant me this privilege.'

"We were stunned. I remember my mother's astonishment and the struggle between her pride and her ardent desire for my advancement. My would-be benefactress quickly overrode Mother's uncertainty. The verbal contract was agreed upon. 'All I ask in return,' said this fairy-godmother from across the tracks, 'is that you apply yourself, James, and do your best to fulfill my faith in you.' "

In all modesty, I think I can say I kept my end of the bargain and can look back on a fairly distinguished career.

"I've never forgotten that woman," I told Lyman Fox, "or the

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immense debt I owe to her. She was a truly remarkable person. If she hadn't stepped out of that Packard on that long-ago June day, I might have spent my life in the juice-bottling plant, like my father."

"Very inspiring," agreed Lyman, sipping his Chianti. "Pity there aren't more like her today."

"Well, it's different now. The most mediocre student usually has access to higher education." I'd deliberately withheld the woman's name, nor did I reveal it now as I told Lyman the end of the story —so far as it concerned my long-dead good angel.

"You can imagine how distressed I was when she died, some twenty years ago. You see, she was murdered."

"Good God."

"Yes. One might have expected her to be the least likely victim of murder, despite her wealth."

Lyman clearly found this an intriguing twist to my story. He asked me how it had happened and I told him a young man had broken into her house in the middle of the night and stabbed her to death.

Lyman's wine remained untasted now and his face grew solemn. "How ghastly. Robbery, was it?"

"No. Nothing was taken. There was no apparent motive."

"Was the killer ever apprehended?"

"Oh yes. The very next morning."

"Extraordinary."

"More than that. Bizarre. If it happened today, the TV people would have a field day with it. This all happened in a little town on the Canadian border. There was a trial. The murderer, although clearly guilty, was acquitted."

"Lack of evidence?" Lyman asked. "Legal technicality?"

"You might say that. The young man's defense was that he committed the murder while sleepwalking."

At this point Lyman's rapt expression acquired a sudden guarded alertness, his dark eyes probing into me as if his field were psychiatry and he were trying to gauge the degree of my madness. "Surely not a viable defense," he said flatly.

"On the contrary. The young man's story was that he'd been afflicted with somnambulism all his life. Scores of witnesses and a string of eminent physiologists testified to this fact. As did his wife, of course. It was she who'd called the police. She'd awakened to find her husband asleep on the bed, fully dressed and covered

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in bloodstains. She knew that something frightful must have happened. As it transpired, the young man, who remembered nothing of the event, had risen in his sleep, dressed himself in shirt and jeans, took a butcher knife from a kitchen drawer and walked barefoot three miles to the old lady's estate on the edge of town, crawled through an open window, and murdered her in her bed. No one heard a thing."

Lyman finished his wine and sat gazing into the empty glass. "Hard to believe a jury would swallow such a story."

"We all know how malleable juries can be in the hands of a good defense lawyer. Furthermore, the young man's record was spotless and he himself made a sympathetic impression on the stand. Of course, there were many in that town who felt he'd got away with murder, as in effect he had. Soon after the trial, he and his wife moved back across the border to Canada."

"Incredible," said Lyman, and then added, with what seemed a false air of professional detachment, "Whatever prompted you to tell me all this?"

"Because I have a favor to ask you. But first read this." I took from my wallet an item clipped from a five-year-old copy of the *Toronto Star* and handed it across the table. The item was headed: DEFENDANT IN SLEEPWALKER MURDER FOUND DEAD. Andrew Lee Tibbetts, it disclosed, had been found dead of a drug overdose in a Yorkville rooming house. A brief summary of the case which had aroused such interest back in the seventies followed.

For the first time I referred to the murdered woman by name. "Perhaps because of her lasting influence on my life, I was profoundly disturbed by the way she'd died. Verity Bainbridge had touched many lives by her generosity, young lives such as mine. She *hadn't* deserved such a cruel death."

Pocketing the clipping, I tried to explain how obsessively the case had haunted my mind. I'd read all that was printed about it, of course, and after my retirement, with so much time on my hands, I delved into it more deeply, thinking I might write a book about it.

"You see, Lyman," I explained, "I was never able to accept the conclusions drawn by the court. Oh, I never doubted the fact of Tibbetts being a chronic sleepwalker—I've done my homework on *that* mysterious disorder. Still, it kept nagging me, *why* was Verity Bainbridge the victim? What shadowy instinct drew the killer

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to *her* house? There was no link between them. She was a stranger to Tibbetts. He'd only recently moved to Deaconsfield. He didn't rob her. Seemingly he didn't profit from her death. It was a case without motive, without reason, a senseless tragedy. *And yet I could not accept it as such.* I still can't."

"Perhaps," said Lyman with a faint yawn—by now he'd finished the bottle of wine, "you would rest easier if you did."

"I'm sure you're right." I looked at the clock. "Good lord, is it that late? I do apologize, Lyman, for boring you at such length with my idiotic *idée fixe.* And it's well past my bedtime, if not yours."

"My dear chap, you haven't bored me in the least. It's an appalling story. I'm not sure I shall sleep tonight thinking about it."

As we were saying our goodnights, I reached into my overcoat pocket for what I'd come to think of as my Bainbridge dossier. "Will you do me a favor, Lyman? Will you take all these notes of mine and let me know how they strike you? I've concocted a kind of theory about the case and perhaps you'll let me know if you think it's totally cockeyed. You have the scientific objectivity I lack."

He slipped the folder into his pocket. "Of course I shall. I'm extremely interested."

"I'll call you next week," I said.

Despite the wine and the lateness of the hour I wasn't at all sleepy, and long after I'd arrived home I sat brooding in my chair, wondering if, having delayed so long before breaking my silence, my decision to speak out might have been unwise.

In my amateurish investigation into the Sleepwalker Case I'd employed the method used by the literary detective A. J. A. Symons in tracing the obscure and bizarre history of that late-Victorian eccentric, Frederick Rolfe, which he ultimately published in his fascinating study, *The Quest for Corvo.* That is to say, I wrote a great many letters and made numerous phone inquiries and interviewed several people who had been associated with Verity Bainbridge and with her killer, Andrew Lee Tibbetts.

Travel at my age and with my natural disinclination to stir from home was not the pleasure it had been in my younger days, but it could not be avoided.

My first journey had been back home to Deaconsfield, a trip I'd

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not made for several years, where I sought out Verity Bainbridge's lawyer, a genial and forthcoming old gentleman now also living in retirement. I made no bones about my reasons for delving into the case, and I found Arthur Pembroke equally candid in answering my questions.

"You ask about her will," he said, "and to answer that I must explain that Mrs. Bainbridge was confined to a wheelchair after suffering a grievous accident in her early eighties. Then, about five years before her death, she had the good fortune to be treated by an osteopathic surgeon in New York, a brilliant specialist who after a lengthy course of treatment and surgery restored the use of her legs."

He went on to say that Dr. Agnew and his patient became close friends. "She gave generously to the work of his clinic, and in her will left it a sizable bequest, as well as a personal bequest to Agnew, whom she regarded as a miracle worker, of nearly a quarter million. The residue of her estate was distributed among a raft of charities."

"So Agnew was the main beneficiary."

"Among the individual legatees, yes. Regrettably, the doctor did not live long enough to enjoy his fortune. He contracted pancreatic cancer and was not expected to live more than a year at most. In fact, he survived Mrs. Bainbridge by only eleven months."

"Had he died *before* Mrs. Bainbridge," I asked, "where would the money have gone?"

"The clinic would have got it all."

"And when he died soon after inheriting where did the money go then?"

"We didn't represent Agnew, of course, but I seem to recall his being survived by a stepson in Canada."

My eyes flew open at this disclosure. Andrew Lee Tibbetts was from Canada. Could *he* have been Agnew's stepson? But I quickly dismissed the notion as entirely untenable. Surely in their investigation of the case the police would have explored this possible link and motive.

Feeling it to be a waste of time but with no other immediate inquiries in hand, I decided to follow this line a bit further, if only to tie up a loose end. I finally managed to track down Agnew's New York lawyer; here my efforts were effectively balked. The lawyer, citing client confidentiality, refused to impart any information whatsoever.

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It was time, I decided, to explore the other end of the path, and with this in mind I flew to Toronto and directed my inquiries to the university where, a transcript of Tibbetts's trial had informed me, the chronic sleepwalker had been a test subject in a program of sleep dysfunction research, the findings of which were later to prove so decisive in establishing the fact of Tibbetts's affliction.

That particular research project had been discontinued long ago, but I was able to interview, on the pretext of my writing a book on the case, the former director of the program, a physiologist named Angus McGill. He astounded me by revealing that in his opinion, despite there having been no overt behavioral pattern to support it, Tibbetts was a borderline psychotic.

"Somnambulism," he explained, "has been linked to epilepsy, parkinsonism, imminent psychosis, and dissociation of personality, among other abnormalities."

"Yet sleepwalking itself is not considered a form of mental illness, true?"

"True. Otherwise Tibbetts might have been judged guilty by reason of insanity and confined to an institution."

He described Tibbetts as an otherwise unexceptional young man, good-looking, charming, and feckless. "Of course, Tibbetts was only one of our test subjects. It's too bad Manly Renard isn't still around—one of my lab assistants on the program. He and Tibbetts became pals of a sort during the course of the project."

"Any idea where I can locate him?" I asked.

"Sorry. We lost track of him after he left the university to complete his studies in the States."

In nosing around the area where Tibbetts had lived at the time, I came upon an old neighbor, a garrulous widow named Rosemary Welland-Jones, who had known the family well and had some interesting things to say even if they didn't advance my investigation, at least at first.

"Giselle," she told me, "Andy's wife, was a sweet little thing. She was from Montreal, where they met. Andy was a good-looking lad and she was madly in love with him, despite his problems." She used McGill's word for him: feckless. "You know the type. One job after another. Grass always greener somewhere else. Quite suddenly, they moved to the States. We never heard anything more about them until the murder. Didn't know they'd moved back here until one day I happened to run into Giselle at the Eaton Center. She told me she and Andy had split up two years after they

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returned—she didn't say why—and that she'd remarried. I think she said his name was Donohue and they were living in Scarborough."

Giselle Donohue proved far more approachable than I'd dared hope. Perhaps the passage of time had disarmed her suspicions, or perhaps she found nothing to arouse her distrust in this diffident, elderly professor who landed on her doorstep with his story of writing a book about the sleepwalker case. She was not unwilling to discuss it. I asked her how they'd happened to move to the States, and why Deaconsfield of all places.

"Andy Lee," she said, "was given to sudden impulses, always expecting things to be better somewhere else. They never were. One day he came home and said he wanted to try the States. Said he had a distant cousin living in Deaconsfield. He'd never before mentioned any relatives in the States and when we got there he could find no trace of this cousin. For all I know he never existed. At first, though, things went fine. Andy Lee got a job in a service station and seemed happier than he'd been in months. We even made a few friends."

"The sleepwalking, did that continue?"

"Oh yes, we were both used to that. We lived with it. Then suddenly, overnight, it all ended in that terrible nightmare."

"You must have been vastly relieved when he was acquitted."

"It seemed a miracle. Of course we couldn't stay down there, people were not—friendly. We moved back here, and then when the money came it seemed like another miracle."

"The money?"

"As if out of the blue," she said. "I came home from work one day and found Andy Lee wildly excited. He said we were rich—well, rich for *us*. He showed me a bank book with a deposit of fifty thousand dollars. Said he'd wanted to keep it all a secret—he was the most secretive man on earth—until he was certain it was for real. It seems that an agent acting on behalf of some movie producer in the States had approached Andy—all unbeknownst to me—and offered him fifty thousand dollars for the film rights to his story."

I could hardly contain my excitement. "Do you remember the agent's name—or the movie producer's?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't. So far as I know nothing ever came of it. But Andy Lee changed after that. The money went to his head. He started gambling and drinking. It went from bad to

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worse, until finally I couldn't stand it anymore. I moved out. After the divorce I never heard from Andy Lee again."

Before leaving I brought up the subject of Andrew Lee's participation in the sleep disorder program. She said that he hadn't wanted to talk much about that. "I think he rather resented being a guinea pig, so to speak, even if it made him feel somehow important—special—at the time."

When I asked if she had a picture of Andrew Lee she brought out a box of old snapshots and showed me one of herself, Andrew Lee, and another young man taken at an amusement park near Toronto. It was hard to believe the smiling, handsome, blond young man in the snapshot could ever have been charged with a brutal murder.

"That's Manly Renard with us," she said. "He was a graduate medical student at the university who was involved in the project. He and Andy Lee became quite close."

I told her that Angus McGill had mentioned the name but, like him, she could give me no information about Renard's present whereabouts.

"Unless you might try New York City," she said. "I seem to remember Renard mentioning that he'd chosen medicine as a career because his father was a successful doctor in New York."

Father? Or stepfather, I wondered. The possibility, even if remote, intrigued me.

Until my second attempt to elicit information from Agnew's lawyer proved more fruitful and provided the breakthrough I'd been seeking for so long. He admitted that Manly Renard was indeed Dr. Agnew's stepson and heir. His earlier reticence had been a case more of professional embarrassment than protocol.

"The truth is," he admitted, "we lost track of Renard immediately after settling his stepfather's estate. Our efforts to locate him were unsuccessful. So far as we know, he might have taken the money and sailed off to the South Seas. In a word, sir, he vanished."

A feeling of closing in upon the truth now spurred me on. I had connected the links in the chain that led from Verity Bainbridge to Dr. Agnew, from Dr. Agnew to Manly Renard, and from Manly Renard to Andrew Lee Tibbetts; and as for the murder, lack of proof notwithstanding, I felt that I'd unearthed both motive and means.

For all the good it did me. Unless I could locate Manly Renard

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and somehow pry the truth out of him—and how I could do this, having no hard evidence with which to threaten him, I had no idea—then all my efforts would have been in vain. As time passed it appeared that my attempts to find the elusive Renard were as doomed to failure as the lawyer's. It was as if he'd taken the money—all but the fifty thousand dollars I was convinced he'd paid Tibbetts for committing the murder—and lost himself in some distant land.

A year passed. I'd given up hope of ever writing an ending to the Sleepwalker Murder Case, left only with the satisfaction of having proved to myself the truth of my theory of how and why it had been perpetrated, that brutal slaying of my distant benefactress.

But fate, perhaps, has an even stronger abhorrence of loose ends than does the amateur detective, and it was on an autumn evening, as I sat watching a panel discussion on a TV talk show, that I was struck by something uncannily familiar about the face of one of the participants, a well-known New York physician. I rushed to my files and dug out that snapshot of Andrew Lee Tibbetts and Manly Renard. Even allowing for the changes wrought by time, I was convinced that I was right. The face of the man on TV was the face of Manly Renard.

Only the name was wrong.

Three days after our dinner together Lyman Fox rang and invited me to lunch at his club. His manner on this occasion was anything but genial; no pretense of friendship. As soon as we were seated he shoved the Bainbridge dossier across the table to me.

"I've never read such rubbish," he said frigidly, "nor have I ever met anyone as blatantly deceitful as you."

I smiled in mock surprise. "You didn't find my theory—interesting?"

"I find it libelous. A tissue of lies and wild conjecture. What a funny little man you are, James. To come creeping out of some hole, seeking me out, currying my friendship. What did you hope to achieve?"

"The truth."

He jabbed a finger toward the dossier. "You call *that* the truth?"

"It all fits. You knew your stepfather was dying, would in all likelihood die before Verity Bainbridge, causing you to lose out on all that money. You were greedy and ambitious and as fate would have it you lucked onto someone as greedy as yourself. Working in

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that sleep disorder laboratory at the university you somehow won Tibbetts's confidence—he was easily suggestible and always good for a gamble, and probably a closet psychopath as well. You convinced him that he could murder a stranger and get away with it, would stand a better than even chance of being acquitted once a jury was persuaded he hadn't known what he was doing when he committed the crime. You promised him fifty thousand dollars if he took the risk." I tapped the dossier. "It's all here, the whole chain of events."

He regarded me with supercilious contempt. "And not a shred of proof. If there had been, the police would have discovered it."

"Possibly—if they'd dug as deeply as I did. And been as lucky. It was pure luck I saw you on that TV show. Another thing that convinced me of your guilt was that you evidently found it advisable to sever yourself from your past, even to changing your name, an amusing but not especially clever change. Lyman, an anagram of Manly; Fox, the English equivalent of the French Renard."

His expression remained aloof and disdainful. "And you, James, are neither amusing nor clever. A theory, as you must have taught in your own classrooms, is no good without proof."

"We'll see if the authorities share your opinion. I'm confident the case will be reopened. You'll be ruined, you must know that."

I picked up the dossier and rose. "Thanks for the invitation, Lyman, but I suddenly have no appetite." With that I walked out of the room.

Now that it was over, I didn't really care what happened to Lyman Fox. Enough that I knew my quest had been successful, that I'd done what I could to even the score for Verity Bainbridge. Nor can I say I felt any strong sense of satisfaction when I learned of Fox's death. It was the final proof I needed. A man of Lyman's professional standing and social prominence was not the sort who could face ruin and disgrace.

Nonetheless, as time passes, I suppose it's not unnatural for a shade of doubt occasionally to trouble me. I have the firmest conviction that I proved my case, but as in many more celebrated cases, the evidence, one must admit, was circumstantial. I'm back home at the cottage now, snug and secure, yet for some reason I've been having trouble sleeping. The insomnia keeps getting worse. Maybe I should see a doctor. ●

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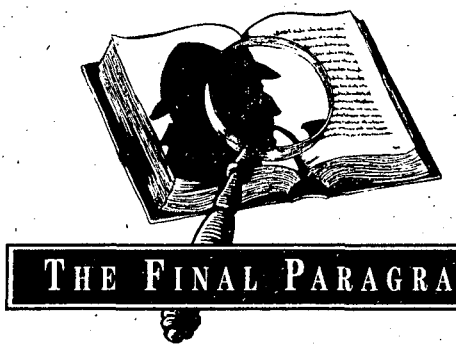

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Murder Set to Music

by Henry Slesar

"It's one-thirty P.M.," Tommy Noone said, lips close to the microphone. "One-thirty and still Noone Time." It was his catchphrase, familiar to radio listeners in White Mills and beyond—not too far beyond, the range of WMZ being less than two hundred miles.

Tommy had been the station's engineer before he married the station owner's daughter. Now he was also its disk jockey, spinning Sixties records from noon to six, to an audience of truck farmers and bored housewives, none more bored, or more truculent, than his wife Trina.

He dropped a needle on a Bee-Gee record and thought about Trina dead, her eyes closed, and, more gratifying, her mouth. He had conjured up the vision more than once in their fifteen-year marriage, but never thought of making it a reality until two weeks ago, when Trina told him she might sell the station.

"It costs more than it's worth," Trina said, and showed him the papers that proved it.

Tommy looked at the old wall clock. It read 1:45. He would make the first move in fifteen minutes.

He thought about how he would behave when they found her body. He wouldn't overdo his grief. Everyone in White Mills knew the Noones were hardly a loving couple. He would be more

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shocked than tearful. He had warned Trina about that shaky ladder a dozen times. In fact, he mentioned it in front of Irma Goodwin when they picked out new curtains in her dry goods store. "You're not hanging these until we get a new ladder," Tommy had said.

It was time. He leaned into the microphone and said: "It's two o'clock, folks, but it's still Noone time, and time for more of your favorite Golden Oldies . . ."

The old tape reel was already in position. He flicked a switch to start it rotating, then slipped into a light topcoat. It was close to seventy degrees outdoors, but he felt the need for outer covering.

He was sure the treelined road between the studio and his house would be deserted. He could walk to his front door in less than eight minutes. If he met anyone, he would simply postpone his errand for another day. He liked to think of it as an "errand."

When he arrived, Trina was sweeping the front porch. She looked at him in surprise.

"What are you doing home?"

He smiled. "Come inside and I'll show you."

She followed him. Sure enough, the curtains had been hung; the ladder leaned against the wall.

"They look great," he said. "Only you shouldn't have used that old ladder. You could have fallen and gotten a concussion."

Before she knew what was happening, Tommy gave her that concussion. With her body arranged in front of the window, he ripped a curtain off its rod and put one end in her hand. Then he left. This time, he was far more careful about being seen.

It was just two-thirty when the last recording ended. It sounded like Frankie Avalon, but he wasn't sure. "It's two-thirty," he said lovingly into the microphone, "but it's still Noooooone time!" He stretched out the name longer than usual. But then, he felt better, stronger than usual.

He'd expected to be the one to call the police, but Ed Joseph, delivering the dry cleaning, peeked through the window when Trina didn't answer the doorbell.

"Oh my God," Tommy said to the solemn group around the dead woman. "What happened?" He looked at the curtain clutched in her hand, the old ladder with its wobbly rungs. "She fell, didn't she? I warned her, but she wouldn't listen!"

"Don't think it happened that way," Officer Buck Potter said, a man usually far more genial. "I think you killed her, Tommy."

"Are you crazy, Buck? You know where I was all afternoon!"

"Sure do," Potter said, and there were handcuffs in his big fists.

Why was Noone arrested?
See The Final Paragraph (p. 285).

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The Smart Guys Marching Society

by Dennis Palumbo

When Dennis Palumbo appeared in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1978, his "day job" was Hollywood screenwriter for such notable films as *My Favorite Year* and the TV series *Welcome Back, Kotter.* After a long absence from short story writing, Mr. Palumbo, now a psychotherapist, is back with a tale that pays homage to the Blackwidower tales of the late Isaac Asimov. †

I'd made the popcorn, as always, but at least Fred brought the beers.

"Can't be a meeting of the Smart Guys Marching Society without some brewskis," he said, letting the bottles rattle noisily as he dropped the bag on my new coffee table.

"Hey, watch it!" I lunged for the bowl of cheese whirls, now perched precariously at table's edge.

Bill, munching peanuts, reached past my hand for the framed photo. "You got it framed!" he said—or, rather, mumbled. A lone peanut escaped his mouth, bounced off the throw rug, and scurried under the sofa.

"It's a goddam feeding frenzy around here." I was crouched by the sofa, reaching under for the peanut. All I came up with was a fistful of dustballs.

Bill looked at Fred, smirking. "Is he a good boy or what?"

"I happen to *like* a clean house," I said, wiping my hand with a napkin.

"Lemme see the picture," Fred was saying, craning to see over Bill's shoulder. It was the Polaroid we'd taken with the auto shutter last week of the four of us—me, Bill, Fred, and Mark. Not a

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pretty sight. We looked like the chorus of a musical called *Forty-Something:* assorted beards, glasses, and receding hairlines, in sneakers, shorts, and one particularly vivid Hawaiian shirt.

"Whew," Fred said, wincing at our smiling, casual poses. "It's a good thing we're smart."

"That's open to debate," Mark growled, coming in the porch door, laden with grocery bags. His dark glasses, dark hair, and military-stiff bearing—a legacy of his career as an Intelligence officer turned journalist—were softened as always for me by his willingness to drop a few actual bucks for some real eats.

"My favorite Smart Guy!" Bill exclaimed, bouncing up to take bags from Mark. "Cold cuts, slaw . . . *now* we're in business."

"Look, are we here to eat or talk?" Fred looked concerned. A lawyer by trade, but philosopher by avocation, he rarely let our monthly discussions stray from what he liked to call "the big issues"—life, death, truth, etc. The usual suspects. He stroked his neat beard thoughtfully. "Today we're doing Middle East policy, right?"

"I hope not," Bill said, settling back on the sofa. He had the trim, wiry frame of a marathon runner, which in fact he was. "I brought a great *Atlantic Monthly* article about health care."

He pulled copies of the magazine article from his back pocket, passed them around. A long-time actor and theater director, he had a tendency to try to control the flow and content of our discussions. With little success, I might add.

"What happened to the Middle East?" Fred complained.

Mark shrugged. "Don't look at me. I was nowhere near there all week."

"Ha. Ha." Bill nodded toward the pages in our hands. "We're doin' health care."

As a psychotherapist, with years of experience handling conflicts, I decided it was time to apply my professional skills to the impasse.

"We'll flip a coin," I said, doing so. Unfortunately, it bounced off the table and, with a perversity I'd swear was deliberate, rolled under the sofa.

Mark looked glum. "It's gonna be a long afternoon."

Let me explain. The Smart Guys Marching Society began as an impromptu bull session a couple of years before, when the four of us (and our wives and kids) were barbecuing in my backyard.

It was a typical Southern California day, the smog doing a slow

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dissolve over the Hollywood Hills. Lazy Sunday conversation turned into impassioned debate, the four of us guys huddled around the smoking grill. Women and children were scattered about, doing real life, while we grappled with such pragmatic concerns as Roman military strategy, foreign aid, and the merits of certain dead film directors.

"Can you *believe* these guys?" Bill ranted to his wife, throwing up his hands. "They think Sturges is overrated!" She stared back at him, unblinking.

We decided to make it a formal event, every Sunday afternoon. Stag. We didn't plan it that way—our wives simply had the good sense not to want to come.

"I have better things to do," Mark's wife reportedly told him.

"Like what?"

"Like . . . anything." Case closed.

Anyway, that's how the whole thing started. Every Sunday afternoon (excepting holidays, kids' birthdays, and visits from in-laws) the four of us — therapist, actor, journalist, and lawyer — met in my game room to scarf down munchies, trade insults, and debate the issues of the day.

This particular afternoon, however, would take a decidedly different turn, one that would change our lives, and the course of the Smart Guys, forever. . . .

The conversation had somehow drifted away from the Middle East, health care reform, and other such rhetorical stalwarts to various tales of unexplained phenomena.

"But that's just my point," Fred was saying, pretty exasperated by now. "We know from Heisenberg's uncertainty principle that the observed is changed by the observer."

"So—?" Bill said.

"So, that explains unexplained phenomena. We cocreate reality, see? Research indicates that the more you believe in ghosts, for example, the greater the likelihood that you'll encounter one."

"Geez, I don't know." Mark shrugged. "I believe in intelligent debate, and in all the years I've come here I haven't encountered it yet."

Fred gave him a look. "The salient factor is that reality, or what we call reality, is codetermined by both observer and observed. Subject and object, if you prefer."

"Reality is reality, dammit." Mark folded his arms.

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Bill gnawed a fingernail reflectively. "Does this have anything to do with Jung?"

I perked up. "That depends. Why?"

"I have this friend. An actor. I directed him last year at the Taper. George is a real fitness buff, hits the gym every day. And he's noticed a strange phenomenon, and is making a hobby of compiling other people's experiences, to see if there's a pattern at work."

"Since when do actors care about other people?" Mark said, opening another beer.

"Ignore him," I said. "What phenomenon?"

Bill went on: "George said he notices that when he goes to his locker in the gym's locker room, even if it appears totally deserted, the moment another guy shows up, it turns out this other guy's locker is right next to his."

"Coincidence," Mark said.

Bill shook his head. "George has made a study of this. No matter what part of the locker room—I mean, he'll just pick a locker at random—and four times out of five somebody's stuff is in the next one. With all these other lockers around."

"That *is* strange," I admitted.

"He's asked lots of other people, and they've had the same experience. It's like there's some kind of primal, unconscious need to bond or something."

I nodded. "That's why you mentioned Jung. . . . Maybe you're referring to his concept of synchronicity."

"Oh, yeah . . . like when you're thinking of someone, and the phone rings and it's that person on the line."

"Or," I said, "perhaps the locker-room phenomenon is caused by some mechanism in the collective unconscious toward merging, or community. . . ."

Fred stared at a corn chip as though it held the secrets of the universe. "I'm thinking now in terms of quantum physics. The tendency of subatomic particles, even at vast distances, to resonate at similar vibratory frequencies." He popped the corn chip into his mouth. "I mean, at that level, everything—you, me, this table—is just a collection of vibratory frequencies, out of which comes form."

"Yeah," I agreed. "That place where Buddhism and physics meet. Emptiness rising into form, manifesting reality."

Bill's eyes were glazing over. "I'm sorry I brought it up." He rose, stretched. "We gettin' low on onion dip?"

"In the fridge," I said.

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Before Bill could take another step, however, a tub of onion dip came sailing out of the kitchen. He caught it reflexively.

We all whirled, stunned.

"I couldn't help but overhear," the newcomer said brightly. "Thought I'd save you a trip."

It was my wife's Uncle Isaac, his bearlike figure filling out his workman's overalls. A retired contractor (a jack-of-all-trades, he'd called himself), he was staying with us for a few weeks. I'd almost forgotten about him.

"Uncle Isaac," I said, "let me introduce you around." He shook hands vigorously with each of the guys, his pale eyes gleaming. Then he stood back a bit, stroking his thick muttonchop sideburns with a crooked finger.

My wife explained to me once that calling him "Uncle" was a courtesy; there was such a convoluted tangle of branches on her family tree that nobody was really sure how (or even if) Isaac was actually related. It seemed as though he'd just always been . . . family.

"How long have you been in the kitchen?" I asked. "You shoulda come on in."

"I didn't want to interrupt. Pretty deep-dish stuff you boys talk. Like college professors."

Fred shrugged. "You should've been here last week. We mostly sat around debating which *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue had the best cover."

"You're welcome to join us," Bill offered, then glanced ruefully at the coffee table. "I think there's half a sandwich left, and some Cheez Whiz."

"A tempting offer, but I had a big lunch. I just came back from a constitutional around the neighborhood." Isaac settled into the corner armchair. A lamp table beside it was stacked with books he'd brought along. Mostly sci-fi paperbacks. Asimov. Heinlein. Silverberg. The classics. "If you don't mind, I'll just listen in. Please don't take offense if I doze off."

"No problem. Kind of a weekly occurrence around here." Bill carved a groove in the onion dip with a potato chip. "Now, where were we?"

"We were talking about reality," Fred said. "Or Jung. Or locker rooms."

It was then that I first noticed that Mark was sitting somewhat pensively. He hadn't said a word in some time.

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"Hey, you okay?" I asked.

"I was just thinking about something," he said, adjusting his glasses. "All this stuff about unexplained phenomena . . . It reminds me of something that happened earlier this week. It's kind of . . . strange, that's all."

Fred looked up. "C'mon, tell us. Something at the paper?"

"Well, I've been doing a series for the *Times* about street cops, the nightly grind, you know? I've been riding the graveyard shift with these cop buddies, Vince and Harry, and a real mess came down a couple nights back, down on Walnut Street."

"I think I saw that on the news last night," Bill said. "Some drug dealer got killed—knifed—by a cop."

Mark nodded. "The cop's name is Sergeant D'Amato. Your basic Neanderthal. Couple of reprimands for excessive force. Always carries a pearl-handled folding knife in his belt—strictly against department policy—but everybody knows . . .

"Well, I've been riding with Vince and Harry's unit out of D'Amato's precinct, and all I hear the past two weeks is about D'Amato's obsession with Tommy Slick."

"Who?" Fred asked.

"The victim," Bill said helpfully. "Street dude right out of *NYPD Blue*. Your stereotypical snarling, murderous, gang-connected drug dealer. Pacino in *Scarface,* without the speeches."

Mark ignored him. "As I was saying, D'Amato's been trying to bust Tommy for years on a major rap, but Tommy's been too . . ." He smiled. "Well, let's say Tommy's been too slick for him."

"Tommy Slick," Fred muttered. "His real name's probably Kablonski or something."

Mark sighed heavily. "Look, guys, if I want sidebars on this story, I'll write 'em myself. Anyway, D'Amato's sure got his reasons for hating Tommy. Couple years back, Tommy killed D'Amato's partner during a police raid—"

"Wait a minute! He killed a cop—and walked?"

"Nobody could ID Tommy as the shooter. But D'Amato swore it was Tommy, that he saw him waste his partner before taking off."

"D'Amato's upset," I mused, ". . . feels guilty over his partner's death. . . . He needs to fixate the blame somewhere else . . ."

"Spare us, willya?" Mark rolled his eyes.

"Yeah," said Bill impatiently. "Besides, this is all just backstory, right?"

"You could call it that," Mark said. "Anyway, all this week, the

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precinct's humming like a live wire. . . . D'Amato's got Tommy's main squeeze Carla in the strike zone—"

"What?"

"He was grilling her, as they used to say," Fred explained. "She must have a lousy public defender."

Mark shrugged. "Carla's no deb queen herself. Juvie hall at thirteen, soliciting and dealing charges—real nice career track, if ya know what I mean. . . . Anyway, D'Amato's been pushing her hard. A big deal is rumored to be going down, with Tommy behind it. D'Amato's been wanting to take him down big-time, and figures this'll do it."

"But why would Carla help him?"

"Turns out she's furious at Tommy 'cause she heard he was cheating on her." Mark leaned in. "Anyway, two nights ago, I'm in the patrol car with Vince and Harry, and a call comes in requesting backup. Seems the girl's taking D'Amato to where Tommy's holed up—

"We hit the siren and red light, and go jammin' over to this rundown place on Walnut. D'Amato's in his car with Carla, who's wailing and crying. We run up to them, Vince and Harry carrying the heavy artillery. Just then, a window smashes above us, glass showering down, and a couple of Tommy's guys are shooting at us."

"Jesus Christ," said Bill.

"Yeah, that name came up," Mark said. "I mean, all of a sudden it's a goddam shootout. Vince is yellin' at me to stay down—Hell, I've got more combat experience than *he* does!

"Finally, after about ten minutes of this, D'Amato tells Carla to stay put and goes chargin' into the place. Vince and Harry got no choice, they go crashing in after him, with me bringing up the rear."

"What are you, nuts?" Fred stared at Mark, wide-eyed.

"It gets worse," Mark said. "Carla bolts outta the car, and the next thing I know, all of us, including her, are scurrying up this darkened stairwell inside the building—Carla screamin' her head off, trying to warn Tommy—

"Bullets are flying everywhere, and then we're upstairs, in Tommy's place. One of his gang is heading out the window. Vince yells, 'Freeze!' and the perp drops his gun. The other perp is in a heap by the bed, covered with blood. . . ."

"Where the hell was Tommy?"

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"That's what D'Amato wanted to know. We're all crouched in the doorway, guns drawn, Carla and me pushed behind the cops. Vince is covering the perp, still frozen halfway out the window . . .

" 'Where's Tommy, dirtball?' D'Amato yells at this guy. He doesn't say squat. Suddenly, D'Amato lifts his piece—'I'm sprayin' the walls, Tommy!'—Vince is grabbing for his arm. Just then, Carla breaks free, runs into the middle of the room. D'Amato roars like a banshee, goes right in after her.

"Suddenly, a door flies open—it was a special hiding place, no bigger than a closet. . . . Anyway, this door flies open and Tommy's body falls out—right into Carla's arms! She reels back, screaming, as the body hits the floor. There's a knife sticking out of his chest, blood seeping through his shirt."

"A knife?" Bill asked, his voice a whisper.

Mark nodded, eyes narrowing. "Carla takes one look at it and yells up at D'Amato, 'You bastard! You killed him!' Before anyone could stop her, she pulls the knife from Tommy's body and lunges at D'Amato! It takes me and Vince to restrain her, Vince finally knocking the knife loose. . . . We all stand there, staring at it on the floor. Even stained with blood, there was no mistaking the pearl handle. It was D'Amato's knife."

"What?" Fred and I exchanged looks.

"Yeah. It was *his* knife that killed Tommy Slick. I glanced instinctively at his belt, where he keeps the knife—it was gone.

"So Vince says to him, 'How'd ya do it, D'Amato?' But D'Amato just keeps staring down at Tommy, his face hard as stone."

Mark sat back, took off his glasses.

"What happened?" I asked.

Mark shrugged. "Homicide and Internal Affairs are all over it. Vince figures D'Amato did it, but nobody can dope out how."

"What does D'Amato say?"

" 'Prove it,' is all he says. 'Maybe my knife wanted to kill the bastard more'n I did.' "

"He's crazy," said Bill.

"Not so crazy," Fred replied. "I mean, if he did it, *how* did he do it?" He turned to Mark. "You say this hidden closet was closed the whole time?"

"Like a drum. Apparently Tommy had had it constructed as a hiding place just in case of a raid or something . . . a little one-man bunker, just for him."

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Bill looked thoughtful. "Maybe somebody else stabbed him . . . ya know, earlier, before you guys got there. . . ."

"Vince thought of that. Like maybe one of the other perps on the scene. . . . Tommy goes in to hide, leaving his two men to shoot it out with the cops. So one of the gang stabs him. The only problem is, where did he get D'Amato's knife to do it with?"

"Wait a minute," I said. "We're making this way too complicated. You said D'Amato grilled Carla for two whole days. What if she spilled the beans earlier? What if he got the hideout's address from her, goes over earlier in the day, gets Tommy alone and stabs him, and stashes him in the secret closet?"

"How would he know about it?" Fred asked. "Unless Tommy conveniently told him, just before getting stabbed."

"Carla told him about it," I said. "So D'Amato kills Tommy, getting revenge for his dead partner—"

"And where were Tommy's two men while this was going on, out getting a pizza?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Anyway, D'Amato comes back, then he radios for backup and does the big raid charade. Meanwhile, Tommy's already dead."

"Interesting theory," Mark said, smiling. "Stupid, but interesting. For one thing, the coroner puts the time of death at roughly when we broke in there. And, hell, I *saw* the knife in his chest—that wound was fresh."

"Okay, let's be logical," Fred said. "It was nighttime, gloomy . . . probably the lights were shot out anyway . . ."

"That's right," Mark said. "And it all happened kinda fast."

"So who's to say D'Amato didn't somehow get into the room ahead of you, the cops, and Carla. . . . It would just take seconds to slip the knife through a door slot, killing Tommy in that hidden closet."

"I'm telling you, that closet was airtight," Mark replied. "Built flush with the wall, so that you couldn't even see a door without looking closely. I didn't see it until it fell open and Tommy tumbled out.—Besides, we all got into that room about the same time. I don't believe D'Amato could've stuck a knife through the doorjamb, even if he'd known where it was."

"Then what are we left with?" Bill asked.

Mark smiled. "D'Amato's knife magically left his belt, found its way into a sealed hidden closet, and stabbed Tommy Slick to death. This in a matter of seconds, in front of witnesses."

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"I still think one of Tommy's men did it," said Bill. "Didn't you say one guy was down but the other one was trying to go out the window when you broke in?"

"That's right. But according to him, Tommy jumped into his special hiding place as soon as the shooting started. The guy swears Tommy was in there the whole time—he never came out, and nobody went near the door—until Tommy fell out dead . . ."

"With D'Amato's knife in his heart," I said. "Talk about your unexplained phenomena."

There was a long silence. Bill frowned at Mark.

"That's it?" he demanded. "What's gonna happen?"

"Who knows? D'Amato won't talk . . . it's kind of perverse on his part, if you ask me. . . . He's so glad Tommy's dead, and that his knife was the instrument, it's like he doesn't care now what happens . . . Though one of my sources in the department says that if charges *are* filed, D'Amato intends to plead innocent."

"Which leaves us nowhere," Bill said. "On the other hand, maybe they'll charge the *knife* with murder—and get D'Amato as an accessory." But no one was smiling.

Suddenly, a voice broke the silence.

"What does he look like?"

We all turned. It was Isaac, comfortably settled in the armchair, his cherubic face shining. Tell you the truth, I'd forgotten he was there.

"Look like?" Mark said, with some irritation. "Who? D'Amato?"

"No, no," Isaac replied. "I mean George, that actor friend of Bill's."

"Oh yeah, the guy in the locker room," I said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Fred asked. He glanced warily at Mark, and then at me.

"Look, Uncle Isaac . . ." I must admit, I was somewhat embarrassed.

"I was just thinking," Isaac went on, leaning back in his chair. "I mean, about that curious phenomenon of the locker room. I was wondering what George looked like. . . ."

Bill shrugged. "Very handsome, in that hunky kind of way."

"If you like that type," Fred muttered.

"You see," Isaac said, "this fellow George noticed that whatever locker he chose—even if each day he chose a different area of the locker room at random—another guy would show up, his stuff in

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the very next locker. In a sea of available lockers, the odds almost always favored this coincidence."

"So?"

"So I just thought that coincidence—or even the collective unconscious, or a field of subatomic particles inclined to vibrate cooperatively—might be nudged along a little if George were a handsome man. Perhaps other men who might find him attractive would make it a point to pretend their locker was next to his."

"But George said the guy would show up, open the locker next to his, and start taking his stuff out—"

"Or start putting it *in,*" Isaac said, "in such a way that it *looked* as if he were taking it out. I did that once in high school—many, many years ago, as you can imagine—when I was attracted to this girl named Shirley. I opened the locker next to hers, claiming it was mine, and put a book in and took a book out, while we stood there talking. Of course, it was the same book. It's really quite easy to do, especially if the locker door opens toward the girl, so her view is blocked as to the locker's real contents."

"Look, Isaac . . ." Mark tried to remain calm. "As interesting as that is, what we've been talking about is—"

Isaac sat forward, eyes crinkling. "Yes, I know. Very mysterious. Unexplained. Your classic locked-room murder . . . only in this case, it's a closet."

"Are you trying to say something, Uncle Isaac?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Just a question I have. I was wondering why Carla attacked Sergeant D'Amato."

"She freaked out when she saw Tommy had been stabbed," Mark answered. "She recognized the knife and wanted to kill him."

"So I assume her fingerprints are on the knife."

"Of course. From when she pulled it from Tommy's body to attack D'Amato."

"I'm afraid that's where we disagree," Isaac said, stroking his sideburn. "I think she grabbed the knife and attacked D'Amato in front of all of you to disguise the fact that her prints were *already* on the knife—from having stabbed Tommy."

"What?!"

"But how? When?"

"When Tommy conveniently fell out of the closet, into her arms."

"But D'Amato's knife killed Tommy."

"I know. She was holding it in her hand at the time."

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We were all talking at once. Isaac waved us down. "Look, what do *I* know? I wasn't even there. Mark was."

"That's right," he said. "And she *couldn't* have planned it. I saw Tommy's body fall out of the closet—"

"Did I say she planned it? Look . . ." Isaac ticked his thoughts off on stubby fingers. "Here's a tough girl, angry at Tommy for cheating on her. D'Amato sweats her till she tells him where Tommy is. She's probably feeling very mixed emotions—hurt, rage, a desire for revenge, guilt . . . But she's a realist, too. What does she think Tommy's going to do when he finds out she led D'Amato to the hideout?"

"So now you're saying the murder *was* planned?"

"No," he replied calmly. "I'm saying that the opportunity presented itself. I'm suggesting that when Tommy fell out of his hiding place, into her arms, in that darkened room, it would only take a moment's thought for her to conceive of stabbing him . . . right there and then. . . ."

"I get it," Bill said excitedly. "Then screaming as his body hits the floor, as though in shock—"

Isaac shrugged. "Maybe in *real* shock . . . in horror at what she'd done. . . . Who knows? But she kept her wits enough to know her fingerprints would be on the murder weapon."

"So she pulled the knife from his chest and attacked D'Amato . . . thus creating the impression it was at *that* moment she first touched the knife . . ."

"Like George in the locker room, only in reverse," said Isaac. "Pulling out the knife disguised the fact that she'd been the one who put it in." Isaac folded his hands on his ample stomach.

"But how did she get the knife in the first place?" Mark asked.

"You said yourself, she ran from D'Amato's car and joined the rest of you, clambering up the stairwell. In all that confusion, a girl with Carla's street background and criminal record could certainly lift the knife from D'Amato's belt." He closed his eyes reflectively. "After all, she needed some kind of weapon—some way to defend herself in case things got nasty up there. Remember, she was playing a very dangerous game . . . both sides against the middle." He smiled. "Moreover, she is a thief. Thieves *do* take things."

Bill scratched his chin. "You might be onto something, Isaac. But there's still one thing I don't understand. How come Tommy fell out of his hidden closet?—He *did* fall, right, Mark?"

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"Hell, yeah . . . kinda crumpled, pushing the door open as he fell. But if Isaac is right, he hadn't even been stabbed yet. . . ."

"So what happened to him?" Fred asked.

Isaac looked at Mark. "You said Tommy'd had the closet built for just such an emergency—small, flush with the wall, airtight seal. . . . Tommy's man said he'd seen him get in the closet at the first sign of trouble . . . and that the door never opened till Tommy fell out. That's about ten minutes, right, Mark?"

"More like fifteen."

"Well, fifteen minutes in a small, airtight compartment . . . I think Tommy merely passed out from lack of air, fell forward—"

"Pushing the door open as he fell," I said excitedly. "Right into Carla's arms. . . ."

There was a long pause. Finally, Mark turned from Isaac to the rest of us. "Well, that makes as much sense as anything else."

"Pardon me," Isaac said. "But it makes *more* sense than anything else."

Fred chuckled drily. "I think he's got us there."

Mark was on his feet, heading for the wall phone. "I'm gonna run all this past Vince. . . . If he presses Carla hard enough, she might come clean."

"Especially if that nut case D'Amato wises up and pleads innocent," Bill said. "Him and his magic knife . . ."

I shook my head. "I still think it'll bother him that somebody else got Tommy Slick after all. . . ."

"Who cares?" Fred was smiling at Isaac. "The important thing was you! That was really something, Isaac."

The old man gave a quick nod. "My friends'll tell you, modesty's not my strong suit. But it's nice to know I can still rub two thoughts together."

"Are you kidding?" Bill raised his drink. "I say a toast is in order. . . . I think we've found a new member of the Smart Guys Marching Society."

"That's a great idea," I said.

"Works for me," Fred chimed in. He tossed a beer to Mark, standing at the wall phone. "Raise one with us, Mark. We're initiating Isaac into the Smart Guys."

Mark toasted him. "Sorry about that, Isaac." Then, turning to the phone, he said, "Vince? . . . You got a minute? You're not gonna *believe* this, but . . ." ●

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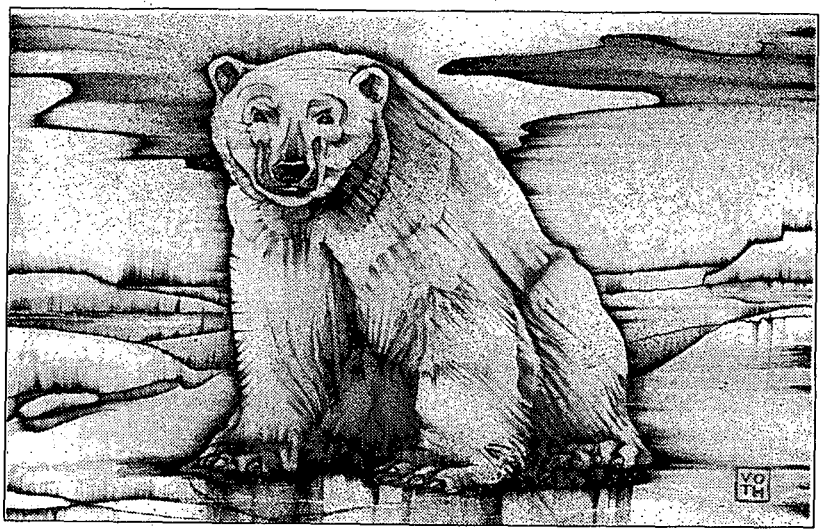

Art by Greg Voth

THE WOMAN WHO LOVED POLAR BEARS

by Suzanne Jones

At first Hal had to use oxygen only at night. Sarah moved to her daughter's old room so as not to disturb him, since he had difficulty sleeping. One night as she stayed up, too restless herself to sleep, she chanced to see part of a movie on the disastrous Nobile expedition to the Arctic. She had been fascinated by the story of the Italian airship that had crashed on its overfly of the North Pole and by the sacrifice of the great explorer Amundsen in his search for the wreck of the dirigible. Of white spaces so vast they pushed at the corners of her mind. But the image that remained with her was that of the polar bear, the solitary hunter, roaming over a landscape like nowhere else on earth, as remote from her

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patch in Boulder as if it were on the moon.

Now Hal trailed his oxygen tube throughout the house like a tendril of himself, slowly dragging it through every room. Sarah thought of it as a horrid kind of umbilical, this hose which supplied his laboring lungs. She found it lying everywhere like the golden track of a great snail, marking his passing by shiny lengths of itself on rug and up stair, disappearing beneath the closed door of the bathroom or the bedroom when he went down for his nap. She had an aversion to stepping on it, as if she could collapse it with her weight and cut off his very breath, though she knew very well that she could not. It was more a squeamishness which caused her to avoid it, as she would avoid earthworms on the walk after a heavy rain, rather than some concern for trampling a defenseless part of him.

Then one day, he simply stopped. Stopped moving with his painful tread. Stopped breathing. Stopped.

There was no very good reason for him to continue, though she had been warned that he might go on as he was for years. "Congestive heart failure due to complications from emphysema" is what his physician told her, his great gray eyes swimming sympathetically, like the yolks of petrified eggs on eyeballs of fishy white. He too will be dead soon, she thought.

There was no immediate sense of release. She went outside and sat on the front steps. Before her Campbell's Cliffs, darkly wet from the last snow, lay against the slope of Flagstaff and looked much the same as they usually did at that time of year, though the snow, coming in late October, had been early. The mountain still wore its autumn reds and yellows. The cold air stung her eyes and made them water, simulating grief.

The ambulance came and went. The day girl came and tidied away and made up his bed. His pillows were as crisply white as an arctic landscape, the sheets as desolate as the sweep of arctic plain.

When she is not turning out fiction, Suzanne Jones writes freelance for a medical firm in Colorado. Colorado settings frequently appear in her stories, especially the University of Colorado at Boulder, where the author herself was once a student. †

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The doctor left her some capsules to help her sleep.

Then she was alone. Truly alone. Someone had thoughtfully collected the three green interconnected oxygen tanks which had stood side by side in the downstairs hall. There were only the circular indentations in the rug in the hall to remind her. She supposed in time they would disappear.

There was an odd, uneasy silence in the house. She didn't miss the sound of the oxygen because it had made little sound really, no more than a gust of wind. It had never hissed except when she had, in the beginning, filled the portable tank for him when he wanted to go out of the house. But it had been months since he had wanted to do so.

From time to time throughout that first evening she imagined she heard a scuttling, a rustle in the dark, or would glimpse a movement out of the corner of her eye. Then nothing. Nothing when she put on the lights, all the lights, and went slowly through the house. The undraped windows of the dining room shone as black and hard as obsidian, mirroring her solitary image, satisfying her that she was truly alone. Except for the smell of him, which lingered, clinging to rug and walls and bed most strongly in his room, but layering the air throughout the house with the oppressive sweetness of illness. She blamed the sounds on the resurgence of a memory of some long-forgotten pet, the clicking of a dog's nails across the kitchen tiles, then muffled in the carpet. Something like that.

She had looked down at the narrow shape of him beneath the sheets as they wheeled him across the porch and lifted the gurney down the steps. He had become a ridge of snow drifted against stainless-steel tubes. As pale and remote already as the memory of spring.

She avoided looking in mirrors for the rest of that day and night as she made the obligatory telephone calls: to her daughter in Colorado Springs, to Hal's cousins, to the English Department, to two or three of their friends.

She did not remember much of the funeral or the colleagues who eulogized him as a scholar, an educator, generous with his knowledge and his time. Thoughtful of his students. Widely respected and admired.

His colleagues and friends and the elderly cousins had filled the funeral home in which he lay in Brooks Brothers splendor prior to

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cremation, his nostrils pinched but free at last of that damned tube.

She did not recognize many of the people there. It had been five years since Hal had retired. His colleagues were mostly younger than he was, and one by one had disappeared from Hal's life. Now it had been too long for her to remember them with confidence. She would recognize their names as they whispered them to her and took her hand, but she identified them tentatively, as she might music heard faintly from another room. There were, of course, couples whom she and her husband had seen up until fairly recently, who had pretended to ignore the tubing and the outer trappings of his illness, but she was not close to any of them. They were really his friends—their friends.

Her daughter Catherine, smooth-faced and assured, had come from Colorado Springs. Her husband was away on business and could not attend the funeral. Catherine insisted that she spend the night with her mother. Though Sarah agreed, she wished that her daughter would mourn by herself, if she had a mind to. She had seen the tears at the funeral and had been angered by them. If Catherine had felt like that about Hal, where had she been all these months? An intermittent presence. A disembodied voice on the telephone. Yet she knew she was being unfair. Her daughter had her own life. She supposed the younger woman was genuinely sorry her stepfather was dead, but Sarah suspected she mourned for what she had lost long ago rather than the yellowed husk Hal had become. But that was all right, wasn't it? What *should* she mourn for?

"You—I don't know—seem so remote," Catherine had said to her. "The doctor says it's simple depression—"

Simple depression? She almost laughed and had to turn her head away. She feigned a cough.

She awoke with a start in the night and lay listening for the familiar creak of the house in the wind. But there was nothing. She listened for the sounds her daughter might make while sleeping, but it was as if she had gone deaf. For a moment she debated getting up to see if Catherine was still there, but was suddenly afraid that if she tried, she might be unable to move her limbs. She sat up then, heart pounding. Then, fearing she might wake her daughter, she made herself lie back and calm herself and wait for sleep. She found herself thinking of an incident some years after her marriage to Hal.

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They had been sitting one Sunday afternoon in the living room, she on the couch beneath the large window which looked out on Flagstaff and he in the leather chair which had the good light. She had looked up at him appraisingly from her puzzle, at his handsome, patrician profile. He was frowning at the journal in his hand and making notes in the margin to take some luckless scholar to task.

"What does 'iconography' mean?" she asked.

He stirred uneasily, as he always did when she asked him a question to which he should know the answer. She supposed that was part of the problem between them: The longer they were together, the more severe the erosion of her confidence in his omniscience as she found the soft places in his armor. By then she was experienced in doing so.

"It isn't in this dictionary," she said, tapping the paperback which rested against her thigh as snugly as a cat.

"An icon is—"

"I know what an icon is," she said.

He paused, pretending that she had not interrupted him, tactfully ignoring her rudeness.

"Iconography is not, however, the study of icons, as one might guess, but rather the relationship of a group of symbols representing—or rather—bearing the meaning of a stylized work of art."

She wondered if he was ashamed of the "or rather." He had to know that she would recognize it as a clearing of the throat (which he knew she hated), a pause to allow him to think of a more exact reply.

"Such as? Could we perhaps provide an example?"

"If you like. *Hamlet,* for one. Ophelia and Polonius, Hamlet and Gertrude. The Oedipal interpretation. If one views the characters as symbols, they can be manipulated and interpreted virtually at will. A feminist version of the play—which blissfully I have neither seen nor read—purports to have Ophelia running off to join a lesbian guerrilla group. Dear God."

He laid aside his journal and looked at her expectantly, seemingly surer of himself, as if he supposed that he had gained a foothold on the slippery slope of her esteem. She knew he wanted more.

"Does that make it clearer?" he asked. "Shakespeare is rife with examples. Take *Othello—"*

But she was unwilling to grant him more.

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"Never mind. I get the drift."

She was acutely aware of his disappointment. It was as if she had wantonly turned her back just as he had seized on the heart of the matter. She knew he longed for another chance to preen himself before her, but she bent her head ungenerously again to her puzzle. After a moment, she heard him pick up his magazine.

She made herself unclench her hands and spread her fingers on the cool sheets, imagining herself in the limitless landscape of the Arctic, with the wind curling the snow about her feet like smoke.

She had been twenty-four years old when she had gone back to school and taken her first course from Hal. Catherine was five. Sarah was newly divorced and embarrassed at being such an old undergraduate. When asked, she would say that she was "going for her doctorate," for she had every intention of doing so. That was the price her husband had been willing to pay for an uncontested divorce. He would support her and the child until she had collected whatever degrees she could. It was more than generous, but then the divorce had not been her doing. She had left the university after her sophomore year to marry Catherine's father in haste, and as it had turned out, unwisely.

After the divorce, she had found a woman to look after the child during the day and had returned to school eagerly. On the first day of her Milton class she had thought Hal the most attractive man she had ever seen. He was elegantly slender and impeccably dressed in a blue blazer, snowy oxford-cloth shirt with a button-down collar, tailored tan slacks, and a blue and red and white striped tie. His cordovan loafers were so highly polished she was sure he could see his reflection there as he appeared to study them for prompts, rather than the notes stacked neatly on the lectern. While gathering his thoughts, he seemed to prefer to fix on such lowly objects: an imaginary crumb on his spotless tie, a piece of lint on his sleeve. Sometimes he formulated his answer to the rare question in the glowing tip of the omnipresent cigarette, omnipresent despite the prominent NO SMOKING sign posted at the upper right-hand corner of the blackboard. Later she would find that he glanced at the sign at the start of each class before bending his sleek head to light his cigarette. She decided he did so to avoid embarrassing students who might otherwise have pointed it out to him, by making it obvious that he knew it was there. But it also had the effect of impressing on them that ordinary rules applied only to ordinary people. They did not apply to him.

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He was a Milton man, the youngest tenured professor on campus and already chairman of Graduate Studies in English. Even so, he was fifteen years her senior.

She went to him during his posted office hours with a difficulty with her term paper on *Comus*. They went for coffee.

He was not divorced but was separated from his wife who lived in the East. Their affair was discretion itself until Hal had obtained his divorce. Most of his colleagues were stunned when they married. Though they showed her pitiless courtesy, they treated her much the way Hal himself had treated her almost from the beginning, as though she were an attractive, precocious child whose opinions were to be tolerated, not valued.

She stopped her formal schooling after she got her B.A. Though her grades were excellent, going on for an advanced degree would have been too awkward as long as Hal was chairman of Graduate Studies. Besides, she had a young girl to rear.

"What are you going to do?" her daughter asked her over breakfast. "You're still a young woman."

She had not been unprepared for the question but thought its timing inappropriate. Did one bury one's husband one day and go to work for IBM the next? She decided her daughter was old enough to know better and would not profit from a rebuke.

"I suppose I'll go back to the zoo," she said cautiously.

"In Denver?" Her daughter frowned.

"Boulder doesn't have one."

"Yes, I mean, but that's awfully far away to drive, isn't it? Even if it is only a couple of days a week. Can't they get along without you for a while?"

Perversely, her daughter now seemed to feel resuming her activity of choice was a desecration of her weeds.

"It's only two mornings," Sarah said.

"But they don't even pay you for it," Catherine said.

"I don't need to get paid for it. I enjoy it. It pleases me."

Her daughter nodded, humoring her, no doubt.

"And I intend to travel," Sarah continued. "There is a trip I want to take to Canada before Thanksgiving. Travel is one antidote to 'simple depression,' don't you think?"

"Of course it is," her daughter said. "But it's an odd time of year to go to Canada, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Early November is the best time to see the polar bears."

"*Early* November? You mean right now?" Her daughter was

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shocked. She had a little bit of a frightened look. Sarah wondered if her daughter thought her mad as a hatter.

"Next week, actually," Sarah said. "Otherwise I'll have to wait a whole year. It's now that the bears migrate north to Hudson Bay. Every spring they are carried south with the last of the pack ice. When it finally melts, they make their way north along the coast to wait near Churchill until freeze-up. The fresh water at the mouth of the Churchill River causes that part of Hudson Bay to freeze first. That's why the bears are there. They're waiting to go onto the ice."

She realized she was flushed with excitement and talking far too much, but she wanted her daughter to understand.

"Next week?" Her daughter seemed stunned.

"All the arrangements have been made," Sarah explained. "The tour is paid for."

"You made these plans before Hal died." It really wasn't a question, but her daughter looked at her as though she expected an answer.

"I made the reservations this morning, actually."

"Mother," her daughter stifled a wail, "the funeral was yesterday! What in the world are you thinking of? What are people going to say?"

Sarah looked at her daughter's imploring expression. She was reminded then of how different a creature Catherine was from herself. Catherine had a social context. She moved among people. The approval and disapproval of others was important to her. Sarah found it curious that she could have reared such a daughter when she herself had become so indifferent to the opinions of others.

It was as if a door were closing somewhere in her mind with a vaguely metallic sound.

"Tell them I've gone to the south of France for my health," Sarah said. "For my grief."

Her daughter swallowed. Sarah thought that Catherine seemed very far away. "I'm sorry," Catherine said. "Everyone knows how devoted you were to Hal. Of course you must go on your trip now if that's what you want to do. I was just surprised, that's all. I know how fascinated you are by the bears. Had you discussed your going with Hal?"

A sly, probing question. Her daughter knew very well how Hal

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felt. He had labeled her involvement with the polar bears at the zoo as "obsessive behavior."

When it became obvious that her mother was not going to respond, Catherine dropped her eyes to the surface of her coffee. "I think it will be good for you to get out of Boulder, in any event. These last few months can't have been easy for you."

How easily her daughter had suddenly turned gracious. What a social creature she was. Sarah wondered if Catherine *would* tell her friends that her mother had taken her grief to a warmer clime.

The next day her daughter went back to Colorado Springs, and Sarah went back to the zoo. She followed the same route automatically: the old Boulder turnpike to Denver and I-25 then south down Speer along Cherry Creek. She scarcely noticed that the lilacs along the edge of the Denver Country Club had taken a beating in the last snow, that some of them already had lost their leaves. She turned left on Colorado Boulevard and drove to the zoo, which was just off 23rd. She always went the same way, even though she knew it was not particularly the most efficient. It would do. Like a pony in a pound, she wore her way.

After her stint in the office, and lunch, she went to the polar bear pit, as was her custom. She felt she had been away for a month rather than less than a week.

Ula brought her head up and stared at Sarah across the reach of water which separated the pit from the fence. Sarah doubted the bear could recognize her from sight. Besides, she supposed she appeared to Ula much as Ula appeared to her, indistinguishable from any other polar bear of like size, nor was there any reason to believe that Ula could distinguish Sarah's particular smell from the others milling along the edge of the fence, though she supposed the bear's sensitive nose might have that capability. On the ice pack bears could scent prey thirty miles away. But here were many prey, and Sarah assumed that her own smell was inextricably mingled with the others. But she stood in her regular place and was shyly pleased when the bear raised its great head and probed the air in her direction. There was a moment when the bright black eyes seemed to single her out, to rest on her curiously, but she had too much humility to mistake that for recognition.

She remembered that there had been a time, early in her relationship with Hal, when she refused to believe that their attrac-

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tion was mutual. It was too improbable that he would actually want her when he was everything she had always wanted. She loved the smell of him, of tobacco and wool and gin. Loved his voice, husky and deep and brimming with passion for Milton's grandeur. The self-absorbed way he paced behind the lectern, as if so involved in the world he was describing that he would have continued talking and walking had they all stolen away, one by one. She loved his contemptuous indifference to their opinion. His arrogance. That these might have been difficult qualities to live with did not occur to her for some time.

And what had he seen in her, this mother of a five-year-old child? Sarah's parents were dead by the time she met Hal, and her lineage had not been a particularly distinguished one. But Sarah had good, clear skin, thick dark-blond hair which was forever working itself free of pins and getting into her eyes, a tidy body, and large gray eyes that drooped ever so slightly at the outer corners like teardrops.

"Like the Queen of Hearts or a lady of the Italian Renaissance," Hal told her. For the art of the Italian Renaissance was a passion of his. Every year he went to Florence. He wanted very much to show her Florence.

Later she would decide that it had less to do with how she looked or who she was than that he was in love with her being in love with him. He was flattered by the intensity of her passion and intoxicated by her humility. He was so centered on self that only someone willing to share that self-interest could penetrate his indifference. And he was charmed that she seemed as interested in his thoughts on the machinery of local politics or the most effective way to combat the aphids on his roses, as his pronouncements on the *Areopagitica*.

They had other things in common, of course. They played tennis together. Skied. Took long walks about the town with Catherine. Hal was appropriately, if not extravagantly, attentive to her young daughter. Certainly more attentive than Catherine's natural father, who had by then started another family of his own.

The unhappiness in the early part of her marriage to Hal was all her own, as she felt more and more keenly the disparity in their respective stations. It required more than filling in the appalling gaps in her literary education. She knew she was foolishly sensitive to the condescension shown her by the other wives of the department, few of whom had any more education than she,

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but they had the advantage of their years, their wisdom, and the psychic battle scars suffered in their husbands' tortured struggles to attain the recognition which Hal had already achieved and she so effortlessly shared. She could not experience the camaraderie of their shared disappointments in failed appointments and rejected publications. They were of another generation, and though she recognized that their slights and lack of cordiality arose from envy, that recognition was of little consolation. She was "Hal's wife." And the years which separated her from them were a gulf which she could not seem to bridge.

She learned that she could not share this hunger for acceptance with her husband. It puzzled him, then irritated him. So she devoted herself to her family. To housework and gardening and dinner parties. She filled up her days the way a nautilus built its shell, layer by layer and chamber by chamber, never mistaking an instinct to survive for delight in the complexity of design.

Time was on her side, but as she had accumulated sufficient years to simulate wisdom, the other wives had gone—to other schools, to retirement, to the grave. And in their place were women not so much younger than she but whom she found very different. They were bright and ambitious for themselves as well as their husbands. If they were intimidated by Hal's wife, they showed it only in that they approached her with considerable reserve. So ultimately she was deserving of their respect only and not their friendship. It was at about this time that her daughter married.

Sarah and Hal began to travel more, to Mexico and Hawaii and of course to Italy, and the disappointments she had experienced early in their marriage she felt were behind her. If there was less passion, she and Hal were easier with each other now, expecting little and demanding less. The passage of time had weakened his compulsive assertion of his superiority as it had armed her with a dispassionate indifference. It should have been the best of times, but little by little Hal's health failed.

In late January, shortly after she had seen the Nobile film, a long article on Ula's rejection of the cubs appeared in the newspaper. She had read it avidly, and went into Denver the following week to see the cubs, taking the route that would later become as much hers as the steps to her own house or the back walk among Hal's roses.

Only two months old, the cubs looked like the teddy bears of her

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childhood as they sprawled on the floor of the nursery with their legs splayed on either side, bodies flat on the carpet. They couldn't walk yet and propelled themselves across the floor on their stomachs with a rowing motion. Their nose and eyes were black buttons. They nursed greedily in the quilted laps of the women who tended them and shrieked and hissed in disappointment when they had sucked the bottles dry. A volunteer stood with the crowd which had assembled outside the glass of the nursery and demanded they lower their voices because "the noise was causing the cubs stress." And of course to keep moving so that everyone could see.

Sarah disliked the woman controlling the crowd, disliked her assertive, confident manner. She wondered how such a disagreeable personality had come by her position. In moments Sarah had been rushed past the great glass window of the nursery and found herself again in the bright sunshine. Having already endured Hal's derision at her interest in the cubs, and disappointed that she had seen so little for her six dollars, she decided she would visit the mother of the cubs, although she was on the other side of the zoo. Still, it was a nice day, warm for January, and Hal would not expect her for hours. She walked past enclosures of kangaroo, ostrich, eland, zebra, and warthog, past the main entrance with its business office to an exhibit entitled "Northern Shores," where she saw Ula for the first time.

The polar bear pit curved beneath an overhanging high concrete bank cleverly sculpted and studded with stones and simulated streaks of clay to look like the bank of a river. Despite the cleverness, even Cherry Creek, the concrete-walled trench which Sarah followed through the heart of Denver, looked less artificial.

Along the foot of the bank was a narrow beach bordered by a stream which traversed the length of the pit, swiftly running down the slope from right to left. Between it and the low fence was the pool, the surface of which was some four feet below the low box hedge and the three horizontal pipes set in cement posts which made up the barrier between prey and predator. The bear was sitting on the base of its spine alone at one end of the pit, sprawled like an old woman with its stubby hind legs spread indecently apart in front of it. The soles of its feet were as black as its nose and eyes.

The bear was sleek, sleeker than Sarah would have imagined. Its coat looked as smooth as that of the seals it was designed to

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hunt and feast on. It swung its head toward the spectators. The bear tested the air, probing it with an up and down motion of its head, thrusting its muzzle in the direction of the sparse crowd.

She found herself nodding forward as though she too were testing the air. And for one dizzying moment the bear stopped its motion and stared directly at her across the pool. It wasn't for long, scarcely time for her heart to turn over, but she felt a piercing thrill, part pleasure and part fear. It was a look which belonged in a cold, wild place.

Suddenly the bear rolled forward and moved with surprising speed along the narrow beach the length of the pit and up the slope through an opening in the concrete wall. She heard a thundering, metallic sound.

"Feeding time," a tall young man told his small son, who was frowning in disappointment.

And that was it. The bear did not reappear. Sarah descended steps which curved down to a glass viewing area beneath the surface of the pool, which looked quite deep, fifteen or twenty feet at least. It was devoid of life. Feeding time, she reminded herself. She now understood why the surface of the water could be so close to the low fence. There was nothing on which the bears could brace themselves to spring upward. Through the clear water she could see a small white towel lying on the bottom of the pool. She waited for several minutes alone at the glass, but no animal of any sort appeared, and she was getting cold. She walked back into the sun and found her way to the business office with a vague idea of complaining about the disagreeable volunteer in the nursery. Instead she picked up a leaflet which told her that for only forty dollars she could become a member of the zoo and a volunteer herself. She could work in the business office, which she now did, two mornings a week.

After her lunch, usually a sandwich she had brought with her, she would stop to see the cubs, then go to the polar-bear pit. There were bears other than Ula: Otto, a male almost half again as large as Ula and father of the cubs, and another female who was a little larger than Ula, but they did not much interest Sarah, even when they dived in the pool and swam on their backs, playing with blocks of ice like otters. It was Ula with her seal-like skin and eyes that seemed to penetrate Sarah's skull and burn images of a far-off place into her brain, Ula, who had the memory of her species, of icy waters and white storms, though disappointingly

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Ula had not been born in the frozen North but in the Louisville, Kentucky zoo. Ula, who paced along that narrow beach, rolling with a rippling, pigeon-toed gait, who caused Sarah to imagine the dark blue skies and limitless sweep of the icecap. Ula was usually solitary, aloof from the others and their often boisterous play.

Sarah went to the bear pit even on snowy days that winter and spring, even on days when driving from Boulder was difficult. Even once when the weather was so bad that Hal had asked her not to. The car knew the way.

One day was very like another with Hal now as his condition worsened. She supposed he did the same things when she was gone that he did when she was there: read, go through his papers, and organize his notes on the long paper on *Samson Agonistes*, which they both doubted he would ever finish now. Sometimes he watched the news at noon.

In the beginning he had asked her about her day at the zoo, what she had done, what animals she had seen, but he quickly recognized that her job was clerical and menial and that her only interest was in the polar bears. It was Hal who had pointed out to her the small article in the paper that fall, the few lines which indicated that the Denver Zoo would be sending Ula to San Diego. Rejected cubs often did not survive, but Ula's cubs were now almost a year old and evidently deemed out of danger so that the zoo administrators decided they had a surfeit of polar bears. They had agreed to transfer Ula in November.

She remembered being surprised by the intensity of her anger at the article and at Hal, who, after all, had only brought it to her attention. However, he was not long in observing that while he could take no responsibility for the arbitrary action of the zoo, its perfidy ought to make her consider how she was wasting her time. She had no more input into decision making at the zoo than any other typist. Why should she drive to Denver two days a week in all kinds of weather? There had already been an early snow. Let her find work to do in Boulder, if that's all she wanted.

How confident he was in his assessment of her situation. How satisfied in his judgment.

She went to her room and got out the brochure on Churchill again. She sat on the edge of her bed and read it carefully, smoothing the pages grown soft and furry with handling. Touching them was like sliding open a door in her mind. Through it she

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could see the polar ice stretching away to the very top of the world.

That night, after Hal had retired, she went noiselessly down the stair, carefully avoiding the motionless tubing, to the oxygen tanks in the hall. She turned the black knob on the top of the master cylinder from 8 to 7, all the way down to 1. It took her almost an hour to do so, gradually reducing the flow so as not to disturb him. Then she went to bed.

The next morning she got up early and gradually turned the setting back to 8. Hal seemed little different, although he complained of tiredness. She had been tempted to leave the setting on 1, since she knew he would not go near the tanks. He despised his dependency on them. But she thought that imprudent and unnecessary.

She repeated that activity for more than a week without any noticeable change in his behavior, though he might have become quieter, more introspective. She felt only a certain curiosity about his condition. She was not impatient.

Then one morning before she left for Denver, he complained of weakness and had her make a doctor's appointment for him for the following day. When she came home from the zoo that afternoon, she found him dead in his leather chair.

The travel agent had been very pleased to be able to find her a room in Churchill at that time of year. It was the peak time to see the bears, and with all the tourists flying in, accommodations were scarce. And he had managed to get her space on one of the buses for three of the six days of the tour.

She had been disappointed in Manitoba. She had expected more snow, but it lay thinly, streaking a desolate plain dotted by many ice-covered ponds. Churchill itself was a small collection of low buildings set on the edge of the gray gravel shore of Hudson Bay under a misting sky. She was told that some of the trees—all of which were less than four feet high—were hundreds of years old. Everything in that bleak country seemed to hug the earth.

The pilot of the early flight from Winnipeg had pointed out some bears on the approach to the Churchill airport, but she had an aisle seat and by the time she leaned across her seatmate, the plane was touching down.

Churchill was cold and damp, and she was tired, but there was a tour scheduled after lunch. The tour bus looked very much like a school bus, but it was heavily reinforced with steel and rolled on huge tires so soft they would do less damage to the fragile envi-

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ronment than a person walking. Or so they said, but the buses following one another had carved a great muddy track across the tundra as they slowly bumped over hummocks and through shallow pools, crushing the ice beneath them.

She was extremely uncomfortable on the bus. Her fellow passengers dropped the windows excitedly whenever they wished to take a picture unhindered by the glass, and they wished to take pictures every time they spotted a bear. Which was often. She was cold and hated being jostled as they jockeyed for position. The motor drives which advanced the film whined incessantly as the shutters clicked and clicked and clicked. They meant to have their trophies. Sarah had brought no camera.

The bears were part of a dull landscape studded with numerous large pale rocks and low, spindly shrubs. Sarah had a sudden sad longing for color. The lilacs along Speer were purple and white in the late spring. Hal's roses had bloomed crimson and pink and yellow until the snow. Flagstaff still had its autumnal reds. Here it was as though wind and cold had leeched the land to bone. In all directions the plain stretched away perfectly flat.

Hudson Bay was a long thin line of dark water on the eastern horizon against a leaden sky. When the bus rolled to its edge, Sarah could see the ice forming a crumbling necklace along the shore.

Despite the repeated encouragements from the guide, Sarah did not leave the bus. She remained behind as her fellow tourists trooped uneasily across the tundra to take pictures of dun-colored lichen and stunted willows at the edges of frozen ponds.

Eventually they returned to town, and she was able to sit on the edge of her bed in the rather ordinary motel and rest and wait for dark, which was not long in coming. She delayed to let people going home from work clear the streets. Around six o'clock she left the motel and hurried along Kelsey, the main street of Churchill and the only one she had seen which was paved. The wind was stronger now, and the few people left on the street were hurrying too, hurrying toward light and warmth. She soon passed the cautionary row of signs bearing the image of the bear which marked the limit of the town. Then she was alone.

It was not so dark that she could not follow the tracks of the buses out of town and across the tundra, angling toward the bay. The only sound she could hear now over the wind was the icy mud

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crackling beneath her feet. From time to time she stopped and raised her head to the biting wind and tasted the air.

She didn't see the bears until she was almost among them. In the darkness she had mistaken them for stones. As she drew nearer, she could see that there were four of them, probably all males. They lifted their heads, swinging their muzzles toward her. Behind them she could just make out the white-capped bay with its growing fringe of ice. Soon freeze-up would begin, and the bears would leave the land behind them. Soon they would be hunting the ringed seals, each bear making its solitary way over the great stretches of pack ice that rotated imperceptibly beneath it, drifting clockwise past Ellesmere Island, Point Barrow, New Siberian Islands, Franz Josef Land, Svalbard, Greenland. All countries were the same in the great polar night. The seals would come up to their breathe holes in the ice, and hunting would be good. Now the bears were coming to the end of their long summer fasts, and they would be very hungry.

She quickened her stride toward them, toward the sea and toward the dark, where they were waiting to take her to the top of the world. ●

Late Night Fright

by Billy James Kirk

Late one night about half past two,
I heard footsteps enter my room.
Pulling the covers 'round me tight,
I closed my eyes half dead in fright.
A shadow hung above my face,
My chiming clock made my pulse race.
Ever so close the breathing came,
I shook in fear beneath its flame
Then toward my face a paw did swing,
My face, it turned three shades of green,
It stopped, then gave my nose a pat,
And I was staring at my cat.

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Devil's Wind

by Michael A. Black

Chicagoan Michael Black began writing fiction seriously in the 1970s, at about the same time he became an officer on the Matteson, Illinois police force. The following piece marks a change for Mr. Black, whose previous work, published in magazines such as *Harboiled,* has focused more often on crime than on the traditional whodunit.

I'd just finished bagging my samples when I saw the cloud of dust roaring toward me about one hundred yards away. Bolo, my horse, began nervously stomping and pawing at the ground as he too eyed the approaching pickup.

"Easy, boy," I said, patting his dapple-gray neck. This seemed to do little to calm him. Perhaps he sensed my uneasiness, for I had little doubt who was in the truck or that they meant trouble.

My apprehension was reaffirmed moments later when, with a shrill squealing, the pickup skidded almost to a halt about twenty feet below me and began climbing the shallow rim of the desert basin. I put my equipment in the saddlebags just as the truck stopped. Joe Threestalks got out holding a pump-shotgun at port arms.

"You're trespassing, *washichu,"* he snarled, his dark brooding eyes barely visible under the brim of his hat. Charlie Onehorse got out the other door. He didn't have a gun, but he locked open the blade of his buck knife and sauntered forward.

"Look, guys," I said cautiously, "I'm sympathetic with the tribal lawsuit. I really hope you win it. Honest. I was just out collecting some fossil samples."

"So you didn't mean no harm, huh, *washichu?"* Joe sneered. He brought the pump back, then snapped it forward, chambering a round with an ominous chunking sound.

"Dump out those saddlebags," Charlie said. "Then empty your pockets."

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Since I'd just spent two hours in the hot sun sweating over a hill of poisonous harvester ants to collect the fossil fragments the ants brought to the surface during their excavations, I wasn't too happy about complying. But I didn't want to argue with a man carrying a shotgun. Carefully, I removed the bag and opened it, trying to explain what it was.

"Just drop it!" Joe yelled. "Charlie, get his wallet." Charlie was reaching with one hand, the knife held in the other, when an authoritative command stopped him. We all looked around toward the source of the voice. At the top of the basin rim, silhouetted by the midday sun, I could see two legs and the outline of a hat. The rest of the figure was obscured by the brightness. But I could still tell that he was holding a rifle.

"If you touch him, Charlie, I'll take you in for armed robbery," Jim Buck said. "Drop that knife."

"But we caught him trespassing," Joe yelled.

"I heard," said Jim, still looking down the rifle barrel.

Charlie threw the knife down angrily.

"Joe," Jim continued in his strong voice. "Put your shotgun on the ground. Now."

As Joe obeyed, Jim's boots scuffed through the crusty red earth of the basin rim and he came down to us. He stopped by me and regarded each of us with his deep-set eyes. His face was flat-looking, with high chiseled cheekbones and an amber complexion. The barrel of his rifle rested on the shoulder of his khaki uniform. In the bright sunlight the reservation police badge shimmered like sterling silver.

"I shoulda known you'd take *his* side," Joe said, gesturing at me.

"Taking a *washichu*'s side over us," Charlie muttered in support. "Still a white man's boy, huh?"

"First of all," Jim said slowly as he stooped to pick up Joe's shotgun, "I'm not taking sides. Second, I'm confiscating this gun until you prove you're cooled down enough to handle it."

"You got no right," Joe protested.

Jim stared at him piercingly.

"You'd better get out of here now," he said. "Before I change my mind and run you both in."

Reluctantly, Joe and Charlie retreated to their truck, muttering an occasional profanity. The engine kicked over a few times, then caught, expelling an effluvium of dark, oil-laden exhaust. Joe popped the clutch, circled, and sped down the hill.

Jim watched them leave, then turned to me. I smiled.

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"Sure glad you came along, Jim."

"They meant you no serious harm," he said. "But they might have roughed you up some. You'd best not come on reservation land anymore."

"I think I got all the fossilized samples I need today. But this area's still not officially reservation territory. At least not until the lawsuit's settled."

"And if McKitrick has his way, that'll be never," Jim said bitterly. "Just the same, you'd best stay away." He pulled the slide on the shotgun back and a double-aught buck round snapped out.

"Thanks again," I said as I watched him ascend the hill, his rifle in one hand, Joe's shotgun in the other.

He turned back to me when he got to the top. "How's Carol?" he asked.

"Fine," I said. "I'll tell her you said hello."

He nodded and disappeared over the rim.

I scanned the mesa for the dust trail of Joe's pickup. It seemed to be heading back toward the reservation. Or the official border anyway. If I rode Bolo along the top of the canyon, I could get to Carol's without risking another confrontation. I swung up into the saddle and steered Bolo to the crown of the hill. Jim Buck's brown four-wheel-drive Bronco was only about a hundred yards off, its light-bar and reservation police insignia reflecting the sunlight like mirrors. He was running a parallel course with me. Good old Jim, keeping a watchful eye on me even though I'd stolen the girl he loved.

Jim and Carol had been an item in college until her father, Paul McKitrick, found out she was dating an Indian and put a stop to it. He'd used his wealth and political connections to get Jim's athletic scholarship revoked. Jim had no choice but to drop out. He enlisted in the army and spent three years in the military police. When he came back, Carol and I were engaged.

As Bolo trotted along at a slow pace I looked over the basin again and appreciated its beauty. Rows of cactus punctuated the dry brown landscape. Distant mountains with layers of shale separated by varying hues of red loomed majestically on the horizon. More than a hundred years ago, back when the plains Indians had signed a treaty with the U.S. government, the buffalo had roamed here alongside the nomadic Indian tribes. Back before the concept of land ownership became a pertinent issue. And long before anybody suspected that vast quantities of uranium lay beneath the shale. As I got farther from the basin, the more oppressive heat

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seemed to recede. Except for the hot dry wind, which the Indians say always precedes doom. They call it *Viento del Diablo*—Devil's Wind.

As I came to the border of the McKitrick ranch, another rider approached me from the opposite direction. The horse, a huge white stallion, was as unmistakable as the broad, powerful shoulders of the rider. I eased Bolo to a stop as Paul McKitrick abruptly reined in his horse next to me.

"Rick," he said with a forced grin. "I figured you were around when I saw that wreck of a Jeep and trailer parked in my drive."

I'd brought Bolo out from town in the trailer and parked it at his ranch. Mr. McKitrick took every opportunity to remind me that *he* always went first class.

"Why don't you sell that old nag to the dog-food company and let me give you a real horse?" he said, glancing at Bolo. His own stallion stirred uneasily.

"He's like a member of my family," I said, trying to muster a smile. "Besides, he gets me where I'm going."

McKitrick snorted, removed his brown cowboy hat, and wiped a sleeve over his artfully graying pompadour.

"Sentimentality doesn't win the ball game," he said. "You'd better learn that if you expect to make something of yourself."

"I had some trouble with Charlie Onehorse and Joe Threestalks out by the basin earlier," I said, trying to change the subject. "Jim Buck ran them off, but they still might be in the area."

"I hope those bastards are," he said, patting his belt. A pancake holster was strapped to his side, the black checkered grip of an automatic pistol sticking out from it. He pulled out the gun and held it up for me to see. "Have I shown you this beauty? It's a German-made nine millimeter. A Sig Sauer."

The gun was flat black, with a boxlike slide.

"This'll take care of those freeloading troublemakers," he said, reholstering the weapon. "They mess with me and they won't be around to get their free pickup truck from the government next year."

He gave me a fractional nod and kicked the stallion's sides, taking off at a fast gallop. As I watched him go, I thought that a hundred years ago he would have ridden with the Seventh Cavalry to fight the Indians. Now he carried a German-made automatic and used a high-priced lawyer to maintain a holding pattern in a courtroom where the legality of a disputed 1876 treaty was endlessly debated.

Bolo trotted the rest of the way in, as if he'd understood McKitrick's disparaging remarks. When I dismounted, I patted him

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reassuringly. As I walked him into the trailer, Carol strolled out of the big white house. She was wearing a tan blouse, tight jeans, and a handsomely sculpted pair of boots.

"Hi, cowboy," she said as she got close. I put out my arms to embrace her, but she took a quick step backwards. "Not till you shower."

"Is that any way to talk to your betrothed?"

"Obviously you haven't smelled yourself lately," she said, wrinkling her nose. Her dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. "Want to shower upstairs?" she asked coyly.

"I can't," I said. "Got to get back to the lab. And Uncle Dede needs me to help out at the shop tonight."

"Oh, okay," she said. "Maybe I'll come by the shop later and let you satisfy my craving for ice cream."

"Craving? You're not pregnant, are you?"

Giggling, she shook her head. "No. Not yet, anyway. But I'll let you know if it happens."

"In that case, I think it's totally appropriate for the beautiful heiress to buy the starving assistant professor the ice cream."

"We'll see," she said alluringly as she turned and walked away with an exaggerated wiggle. "If you're good."

"I thought I was always good," I called after her as I got into the Jeep.

Pulling out onto the main highway, I made the trip back to Pueblo in a fast ten minutes. I put Bolo in his stall in the barn at my uncle's house and took a quick shower. With the desert dust washed out of my hair, I felt a bit more presentable. When I pulled into the parking lot of Uncle Dede's gun shop, I noticed a dilapidated old pickup in the spot next to the door. There was something vaguely familiar about it. I pushed open the door and stepped into the air-conditioned comfort. Uncle Dede was sitting with his feet up on the counter and a cup of coffee in his hand. He showed me his lopsided grin as he straightened up.

"About damn time you got here," he chided.

"I had to wash the desert dirt off me," I said. "Whose pickup is that outside?"

"Oh, that's Sonny's," Uncle Dede said. "He's drifted back into town and stopped in. Wants to stay for a while this time and asked me for a job."

I raised my eyebrows. Uncle Dede and Sonny Lord had been friends for over thirty years. Sonny had been a local legend

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around these parts, having won the gold buckle on the rodeo circuit twenty-five years ago. Unfortunately, he'd spent much of the intervening time trying to crawl out of a bottle.

"What'd you tell him?" I asked.

Uncle Dede took a sip of his coffee. "I told him to put in applications over at the stables and the stores first," he said. "But I guess I'll carry him till he finds something better, or moves on again."

"The latter's probably more likely," I said, withholding further comment on my uncle's friend. Sonny'd been drifting back to Pueblo like a migrating falcon for as long as I could remember. He'd come back for a while and straighten up, then fall back off the wagon and vanish for a few more years. Usually he would work the rodeo circuit. But not as a champion anymore. Now he was only the clown or cleanup man.

"He says he's taken the oath," Uncle Dede said solemnly.

"Haven't we both heard that one before?" I said sceptically.

"Heard what?" Sonny said, slipping up behind me. I turned, somewhat startled. He was tall and angular, and looked better than the last time I'd seen him. The grip of his rawhide hand felt strong and sure. He strolled over to the counter as Uncle Dede handed him a fresh cup of coffee. Despite all his problems with the bottle, Sonny still had a picturesque look about him. Sort of like Gary Cooper. And like Coop, he had a way with the ladies. The tales about his romantic prowess were virtually legendary. He nodded thanks to Uncle Dede for the coffee and struck a wooden kitchen match to light up a cigarette. Removing his hat, he sat down on a stack of boxes and swallowed some of the dark brew.

"Ah . . . Just the way I like it," he said. "Nice and hot, just like a good woman."

Uncle Dede handed a second cup to me, and I sat across from them and listened to their stories. It was hard not to like Sonny when you sat listening to him spinning a yarn. After about twenty minutes there was a lull in the conversation.

"Like I was telling Dede, Rick," Sonny said. "I done took the oath. And this time I intend on keeping it."

I nodded, swallowing the last bit of my coffee.

"I don't blame you for being doubtful," he said. "But there's just one way for me to prove it. Say, you still going out with that pretty little gal Carol?"

"Yeah," I said. "We're engaged."

"Well, congratulations," he said, extending his hand. "You set the date yet?"

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"No, that's still a ways off," I told him. "I gotta finish school first."

"She's gonna inherit a lotta money, I hear," Sonny said slowly.

"Yeah," I said, wondering how he knew so much. When she turned twenty-five, Carol would inherit control of the trust fund that had been set up in her mother's will. I think it stuck in McKitrick's craw that she'd be able to do what she wanted then. In the meantime, he could pretty much call the shots.

I pulled out my wallet and showed Sonny a snapshot of Carol and me. He grabbed the plastic case and paged through the folders, stopping when he found one of Carol's graduation pictures.

"She sure is pretty," he said, staring at the picture and shaking his head. Then, handing the wallet back to me: "You sure are a lucky man."

"Thanks."

"How you get along with old man McKitrick?" he asked.

"How does anyone get along with him?" I joked. At first McKitrick sort of approved of me. After all, I was white and pursuing a Ph.D. in a respectable field. But we'd had a minor falling out when I rejected a job with his company in favor of a teaching position at the university that would enable me to finish up my geology degree.

"I just saw him a little while ago." I told Sonny. I related the brief encounter in the desert, and told them about his comment regarding the Indians.

"Damn," Uncle Dede said. "I sold him that Sig Sauer. I hope he don't go shooting nobody with it."

"If he does, it better be in self-defense," I said.

We chatted for about five minutes more. Long enough for Sonny to gulp down the rest of his coffee. He seemed suddenly agitated and said he had to take off. After he'd left I asked Uncle Dede if he really thought that Sonny had straightened himself out.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "He's looking better than I've seen him in a long time, but it's sorta like putting a cougar in a pen. He might be dying on the inside."

I told Uncle Dede that I'd be back, and went over to the university geology lab and sorted out the samples that I'd bagged along the basin. After fixing the slides I needed and writing up about ten pages of crude notes, I glanced at my watch and realized it was close to five. I'd promised Uncle Dede that I'd help him with the store inventory that night, so I put everything away and stored the samples in my lab locker. Then, after grabbing a quick burger and fries to eat on the way, I drove back to the gun shop.

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Uncle Dede had a cup of coffee all ready for me and we settled in to work. It took us a couple of hours, and afterwards I watched the counter while my uncle worked on some guns that people had brought in for repairs. Because he owned the gun shop and was the best smith in the territory, Sheriff Pete Gunther had made Uncle Dede a special deputy. That's why I wasn't surprised when the sheriff telephoned about twenty minutes before closing.

"You want to talk to Uncle Dede, Sheriff?" I asked.

"No, Rick," he said. "I was trying to get ahold of you. I'm out at the McKitrick place. You'd better get out here pronto."

"Is Carol okay?" I asked, panic edging into my voice.

"She's not injured," he said slowly. "But the doc's on the way to give her a sedative. Her father's been killed."

"Killed?" I said. Uncle Dede's head popped up from the trigger mechanism he'd been working on.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Apparently Mr. McKitrick went riding earlier today out on the north forty. His horse came back in riderless about four hours ago, so they figured he'd been thrown or something. They went out lookin' and found him out by the canyon. Dead."

"Did he fall?" I asked.

"No," the sheriff said. "He'd been shot."

By the time we got out to Carol's, the drive was a maze of revolving red and blue lights. Sheriff Gunther, visible because of his extreme height and white Stetson, was barking out orders. Uncle Dede strode up to him and asked if he needed any help.

"Not right now, Dede," he said. "But, Rick, you might want to look in on Carol. Doc Gleason's with her now."

I hurried into the house and ran upstairs to Carol's room. The doctor and McKitrick's fourth wife, Christene, were with her. He'd already given her something, and I held her for a few minutes before she drifted off to sleep.

Christene put a hand on my arm and thanked me for coming. Only a few years older than Carol, she was normally a very attractive woman, but tonight she looked totally spent, her face swollen from crying.

"You all right, Christene?" I asked.

"It's just such a shock," she said, breaking down again. "There're so many people I have to call."

"Why don't you let me call Mason Gilbert?" I said. "He can handle things while you get some rest."

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Mason Gilbert was McKitrick's lawyer. He lived in Deming, which was about twenty miles away.

Christene nodded and went down the hall toward the master bedroom. As I was paging through the Rolodex by the phone, Sheriff Gunther and Uncle Dede came in.

"How's Carol?" Uncle Dede asked.

"She's sleeping," I said. "Sedative."

He nodded, then said, "Rick, I was telling the sheriff about that little run-in you had with Threestalks and Onehorse this morning. Would you mind going over it with him?"

I was still holding the phone in midair, staring at the sheriff, who gave me a reassuring little nod.

Things began to heat up pretty fast after they arrested Joe Threestalks and Charlie Onehorse. After hearing the story of my confrontation, the sheriff put out a broadcast to bring them in for questioning. One of the county units spotted Joe's pickup at the Wigwam, a local Pueblo bar, and they grabbed him and Charlie as soon as they got back in the truck. Mr. McKitrick's nine millimeter Sig Sauer was found wrapped in a rag under the front seat. Joe and Charlie swore up and down that they didn't know how it got there, but they were both charged anyway.

The next day, when he heard about the arrests, Jim Buck drove into town and demanded custody of the Indians because the crime had occurred on the disputed tribal land. Sheriff Gunther practically threw Jim out of the jail, and Indian/White problems began to escalate all over Pueblo, the reservation, and at the university. Uncle Dede and I closed up the gun shop, which we normally did in tense times, and put the Gone Fishin' sign in the window. I went out to Carol's and helped her and Christene with the funeral arrangements and notifications. Mason Gilbert handled everything else. Carol's trust fund was safe. Christene, who'd married McKitrick nearly twenty years after Carol's mother drowned on vacation with McKitrick in Cancun, had signed a prenuptial agreement and would receive a substantial one-time cash settlement. She seemed to be taking it better than Carol, who seemed listless and depressed.

"It's so sudden," Carol said, the tears brimming in her eyes again. "So abrupt. Just like when Mom died."

I held her close and let her cry, searching for the right words, but unable to find them.

Christene came in and asked Carol to help her pick out some of

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her father's clothes for the undertaker. Figuring that it'd be better if she was occupied, I urged her to do it. I told them I had to go feed Bolo, after which I'd come back. I got into the Jeep and sped down the long asphalt roadway that intersected with the highway. As I slowed to a stop at the end of the road, Fred Perks, the mailman, pulled up beside me in his mail car.

"Sorry to hear about Mr. McKitrick," he said, handing me a stack of mail through the open window.

"Yeah," I said, slipping the mail into the inside pocket of my jacket. Fred knew everything about everybody and could talk the legs off a chair. I had no desire to engage him in a long conversation. "I'll give them the mail when I get back, Fred."

"Sure thing, Rick. And tell 'em that I hope they fry those dirty red bastards."

"We'll have to see, Fred," I said, pushing in the clutch and putting the Jeep in first gear. "They haven't been convicted yet."

"They will be. They did it, didn't they?"

As I drove back to town I couldn't help wondering if Fred was right. The case did seem pretty open and shut.

When I got to the shop, I went in the back way. Uncle Dede was leaning over the table with the works of a shotgun spread out in front of him. Sonny sat across from him, elbows on his knees, holding a cup of coffee. He grinned and nodded.

"Figured with the way things are heatin' up I'd better get the sheriff's gun fixed," Uncle Dede said.

"How's Carol?" Sonny asked.

"As good as can be expected," I said. "She lost her mother a number of years ago."

"Yeah," Sonny said. "I remember." Then he shook his head with a wistful smile. "Her mama, she was something."

"You knew her?" I asked. To me, Carol's mother was only an exceptionally beautiful woman in some old photographs. Carol's recollection wasn't much more complete.

"Everybody did," Uncle Dede said. "Pueblo wasn't as big back in them days. Didn't have the university. She was the town beauty. Everybody dreamed about her."

"And McKitrick got her," I said.

"Yeah," Uncle Dede replied. "Always said she married for love, and he married for money. They produced a good girl, though. Carol's a winner."

"She took after her ma," Sonny said caustically. "Not McKitrick."

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Uncle Dede looked up with a sly smile.

"Why, Sonny," he said, "if I didn't know better, I'd swear that you ain't gonna miss him."

"Oh, I'll miss him all right," Sonny said slowly, letting the implication of his sentence drop. He stared at me over the rim of the coffee cup as he drank the rest of the liquid.

Things remained tense in the town and Sheriff Gunther moved Charlie and Joe to the county jail, which was about thirty miles away. The judge had ordered them held without bond until the preliminary hearing. The wake for Paul McKitrick was held the next day. I got out my one decent sport jacket and stayed at the funeral home with Carol and Christene. To make things more tragically ironic, Christene confided to us that she was two months pregnant.

"I don't know what to do now," she said.

"I've always wanted a baby sister," Carol told her reassuringly.

Practically the whole town showed up for the wake, and it was early evening when we got back to Carol's. As I pulled into the driveway, everything looked normal. But when we got to the door, I saw that the jamb was splintered.

"What's that?" Carol asked.

"Stay here," I said. "Somebody must have broken in."

I cautiously pushed the door open and looked inside. The drapes had been drawn and it was pretty dark. I reached for the light switch and flipped it on. Nothing seemed out of place. The only damage I found was in the main study, which McKitrick had used as his office. Everything was turned upside down. Papers were strewn everywhere, and the locked desk drawer of McKitrick's big oak desk had been pried open.

When the sheriff got there, he chastised me for going through the house before calling him.

"I've got enough problems without somebody surprising a burglar and maybe getting shot," he snapped. "Now go stay in the kitchen, all of you, till we can process the scene."

Christene suddenly began to feel ill, and Carol helped her upstairs to her room. As I sat at the kitchen table, the phone began ringing. After about five rings I figured that the women were still busy, so I answered it.

"McKitrick residence," I said.

"This is Dr. Frank Hardy," a masculine voice said. "To whom am I speaking?"

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I identified myself, and asked if I could help him.

"I was out of town for a few days," the caller said, "and I just heard about Mr. McKitrick."

"I see, Doctor. Did you know him well?"

"Not really," Hardy said. "My practice is located in Buffrington. Mr. McKitrick sought out my services about a month ago."

Buffrington was the next large city to the north of Pueblo. It was a good fifty miles away.

"I see," I said, somewhat perplexed.

"In fact, I just sent Mr. McKitrick a letter he requested a few days ago. You can imagine my surprise when I found out he'd passed away." He exhaled loudly, then continued. "I do have a slight problem, of a somewhat sensitive nature. You see, the bill for the tests I did for Mr. McKitrick has not been paid."

I rubbed my hand over my forehead and asked him for his address and phone number. "I'll have the family attorney get in touch with you," I said.

"The invoice was enclosed in the letter," he said genially.

"I'll look for it," I said. And as I hung up, something stirred in the back of my memory.

Hours later, I found Dr. Hardy's letter in the pocket of my jacket, which I'd absentmindedly hung over the back of a chair in my room. I remembered pocketing the McKitrick mail the day after the murder. The call from Hardy had seemed annoying at the time, but my curiosity as to the nature of the tests kept gnawing at me. Why would McKitrick have gone all the way up to Buffrington when he had a family doctor right here in Pueblo? Was the letter something that was going to cause more grief for Carol and Christene?

The steam from the teakettle rose upward, accompanied by a sharp whistle that seemed like an alarm signal for my guilty conscience. But by the time I had the flap worked open, I had rationalized that I was doing it for the greater good: trying to shield the girl I loved from any needless pain.

The letter, with Dr. Hardy's invoice inside, documented the results of some DNA tests that McKitrick had requested on himself and Carol. I remembered that she'd told me casually that Christene, her father, and she had blood drawn about a month ago after a trip to Mexico, but Mr. McKitrick had said that it was to check for hepatitis.

I read the letter over twice before I accepted what it said: The

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results of the tests on Paul and Carol McKitrick showed conclusively negative patterns. Carol was not his natural daughter.

After the funeral, the house was full of mourners and I finally told Carol that I had to get out for a while. I left her surrounded by relatives and drove back to the gun shop. The front door still had the Gone Fishin' sign on it, so I let myself in the back. I wanted to ask Uncle Dede's advice about what to do with the letter, but couldn't bring myself to talk about it. Instead, I asked him what kind of a man Paul McKitrick had been. Even though Carol and I were engaged, Mr. McKitrick had always seemed distant to me. Maybe, I thought, if I knew more about the man I'd be able to figure out what to do.

"He was what you might call a collector," Uncle Dede said, leaning back from the tabletop. "He always had to be in total control, or seem like he was if he wasn't. And it really bothered him if he wasn't. Not that he didn't lose occasionally, but he hated to. And would always try to cover it, if he could."

"Just like the treaty war with the Indians," I said.

Uncle Dede nodded and smiled.

"Now, you want to tell me what's bothering you, Rick?"

"You can see right through me, can't you?" I told him about the letter, which I'd stowed in my lab locker for safekeeping. Uncle Dede bit his lip when I mentioned the contents.

"Only one thing you can do at this point," he said. "Go get that letter and turn it over to McKitrick's lawyer.

"Mason Gilbert? Do you think that's wise? What'll that do to Carol?"

"McKitrick might already have confided in him," Uncle Dede said. "Whatever his reasons were, and I suspect, knowing him, they weren't good, you can't afford to put yourself in the middle of something like this."

I sat silently pondering what he said.

"If you love Carol, Rick," Uncle Dede said, "I think you'll see it's the right thing to do."

Our conversation was interrupted by the phone. It was Sheriff Gunther. He told Uncle Dede that a group of Indians had driven through the north end of town and taken a couple of shots at one of the squad cars. The sheriff wanted Uncle Dede to get in uniform and ride shotgun patrolling the main highway between the town and the reservation. Uncle Dede told him he'd be right there. He hung up the phone and looked at me.

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"So what you gonna do?" he asked.

"Drive up to Deming and talk to Mason Gilbert," I said.

He smiled fractionally, then put both hands on my shoulders.

"I'm proud of you, Rick. But do me a favor. Let me call Sonny to ride up there with you. With all these Indian problems, the sight of a lone driver on the highway is asking for trouble."

"Okay," I said. "I'll shoot over to the lab and pick up the letter and meet him back here."

If Sonny was worried about the Indians, he didn't show it as we drove north toward Deming, past the Reservation. He nonchalantly flicked a coarse thumbnail over the end of one of those wooden kitchen matches and lit his cigarette. The big twelve-gauge shotgun on his lap seemed reassuring.

A squad car passed us as we drove by the Reservation. In a few more minutes we'd be nearing the turnoff for Carol's.

"Hold on a second," Sonny said, his eyes narrowing on the roadway ahead. "Slow it down."

I stared ahead, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Why?" I asked. "You see something?"

"You see this?" he retorted harshly as he slammed the slide of the shotgun back, then forward, chambering a round. The hollow tubelike end of the barrel rested on my shoulder, pointing at my head.

"Turn off the road here," he said. "Do it now!"

I braked and eased the Jeep onto the hard ground. We headed west toward the canyon. The layered red shale loomed ominously before me.

"Sonny, what's going on?"

"Shut up!" he said. "Just keep driving."

The Jeep bounced and rocked slightly as it rolled over the desert floor. We neared the canyon rim. He looked at me.

"I'll take the letter," he said.

"The letter?"

He bumped the end of the shotgun barrel against my temple.

"Don't get smart. Pull up over there and give it to me."

I coasted to a stop near the edge of the canyon. He prodded me again with the barrel, and I took the letter out of my inside pocket and gave it to him.

"Get out," he said, reaching over to shut off the ignition and pull out the key.

I slipped out the door, and he directed me backwards about ten

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feet, then told me to stop. He scrambled out himself and came around the Jeep, still pointing the shotgun at me. There was a hot wind blowing from the southwest. A devil's wind.

"Who else knows about this?" he asked, indicating the letter.

"Uncle Dede," I said. "Others, too. Now, what's going on?"

"You can't lie for crap," he said, removing the contents of the envelope and glancing over them. He reinserted everything. The corner had Dr. Hardy's return address printed on it, and Sonny tore it off.

"Have to pay him a little visit," he grinned. Then he took out another kitchen match and squatted on his haunches, the shotgun tucked under his arm. With quick glances from me to the letter, he snapped the match with his thumbnail and lit the envelope. I watched as the yellow flame trailed the black semicircle of expanding ash over the white paper. He dropped it to the desert floor and the flame consumed the last part, leaving only a smoldering wisp of smoke and crumpled carbon.

Sonny stood up.

"What you got planned for me, Sonny?" I said. "An accident?"

I knew if I tried to run he'd get me in the back before I'd gone ten steps.

"I ain't got no choice now, Rick," he said, licking his lips. "Can't afford to let that letter get out. Too bad I couldn't have found it while you all were at the wake."

"The burglary? It was you?"

He nodded.

"But why?" I said, desperately trying to keep him talking. Trying to prolong whatever time I had. "What does it all mean?"

He exhaled slowly and raised the shotgun to his shoulder. Then he hesitated.

"McKitrick was gonna disinherit Carol," he said. "Told me so right out here that day we met. He knew all the time she wasn't really his blood. Been buying my silence all these years. But now, with that young filly of his pregnant, he'd decided that it didn't matter no more. He was gonna get rid of her. Cut her off without a cent, and I couldn't let that happen."

"*You* couldn't?"

He scratched his cheek. "Move over toward the edge of the rim," he said, gesturing with the barrel.

My feet felt leaden as they scuffed over the dusty surface.

"Why, Sonny?" I yelled. "Why couldn't you let that happen?"

"Ain't you guessed by now, boy?" he said. "I'm her real daddy."

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"Sonny, wait," I said. "It wouldn't have made any difference. Carol would have gotten what was coming from her mother's estate anyway."

"Just like them Indians are getting their fair share, huh?" Sonny grinned ruefully at me as he raised the shotgun again and pointed it at me. "You don't know much about going up against a rich man, do you, boy? And I reckon you ain't gonna have no more time to learn."

My legs felt too weak to run. Paralyzed with fear, I closed my eyes. The shot came and my knees gave out, and I rolled in the dirt, anticipating the terrible pain. Suddenly I heard a gurgling sound and realized I wasn't hit.

Sonny was. He staggered convulsively in front of me. The shotgun discharged explosively, scattering a cloud of dirt off to the right.

Another shot, and Sonny's body jerked violently for a few seconds as he curled over and fell in a twisted heap. I ran forward and pulled the shotgun from under him. Jim Buck came running up carrying his 30-30 Winchester. I cradled the dying man in my arms.

"Rick, you all right?" Jim asked. "I was out patrolling when I saw you . . ."

Sonny's body shook again, and he brought a darkly stained hand up and looked at it.

"Dark blood . . . Hit my liver," he said haltingly.

"I'll call for an ambulance," Jim said, turning to run up to his squad car.

"No," called Sonny. "Got to hear . . . this . . ." A couple more labored breaths and Sonny told us that he'd killed McKitrick and planted the Sig Sauer in Joe's truck.

"Saw it outside the bar." His mouth twisted in a pitiful attempt at a smile. "Seemed a neat way to tie things up."

"Why'd you do it, Sonny?" Jim Buck asked.

Sonny's eyes darted from Jim to me. Then he shook his head. "Tell Carol I'm . . ." He started to whisper to me, then his mouth dropped open and a blood bubble spread over his lips, not bursting until I moved his head. His hands fell limply to his sides. "What'd he say?" Jim asked. I shook my head. "Wonder why he killed McKitrick?" Jim said.

The scrap of the envelope with Hardy's return address stirred in the hot wind, then fluttered out over the edge of the canyon and disappeared. "I guess that'll be his secret," I said. ●

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THE CANCELLATION

by Reginald Hill

Readers may be surprised to find the creator of police detectives Dalziel and Pascoe turning his hand to the private-eye story, but Reginald Hill has always ranged freely across genre lines in his sixteen-year career as a mystery writer. His latest creation, black P.I. Joe Sixsmith, is as irreverently portrayed as most of Mr. Hill's other characters, and the result, as usual, is uproariously funny.

"Hello."

"Who's that?"

"It's Joe, Aunt Mirabelle."

"You sure? Why didn't you say so before?"

"Because it's my phone in my office, Aunt Mirabelle. I always answer it."

"Not when you know it's me ringing you don't, boy."

Joe Sixsmith sighed. As a leading light among the black P.I.'s of Luton who'd served their time as lathe operators, he felt entitled to a little respect.

"What do you want, Auntie?"

"You know Mr. Tooley's funeral?"

"We talked about it last night. You said it couldn't be till next Thursday 'cos they'd had a rush on at the crem and I made a note and said I'd definitely be there. Remember?"

"Of course I remember. Well, it's this afternoon. Half-past three."

"Today? But you said . . ."

"I know what I said. And I told that funeral director friend of yours it was a crying shame that folk had to be kept lying around so long, especially when they'd only got one frail old sister who'd travelled all the way from Belfast to sort out the effects and had neither the money nor the strength to be travelling back home and back here again in space of a week . . ."

"Yes, Auntie," said Joe, risking an interruption. "You said all this. So what's changed?"

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"Mr. Webster from the parlour rang this morning to say there's been a cancellation and did we want it?"

"Lou said a cancellation? Of a funeral? You sure?"

"Don't you start again, Joseph. Just be here three o'clock sharp. Don't want that old lady going home saying they don't know the meaning of good neighbourliness here in Luton."

Joe grinned broadly as he replaced the receiver. It was true that for many years Mirabelle had undoubtedly been a good neighbour to old Mr. Tooley, making sure that he continued to be well fed even when, as often happened, he contrived to lose most of his pension at his much-loved dog track by halfway through the week. But this argosy of Christian charity to a miserable sinner was in risk of foundering on the rock of old Miss Tooley, the grieving sister, who, so far as Joe could judge, had no intention whatsoever of travelling home to Belfast and back in a week. On the contrary, she seemed more than content to more than fill her brother's place, resting in his flat with Good Neighbour Mirabelle coming round with three hot meals a day, in between which she spent most of her time on the Good Neighbour's line, pouring out her woes to her numerous acquaintance back in Belfast.

So news of the cancellation must have come like a gift from God to Mirabelle.

Possibly in compensation for these uncharitable thoughts, and in despite of the shortness of notice and the fact that at ninety-three, old Mr. Tooley had outlived most of his two-legged friends, Mirabelle had managed to drum up a fair turnout, enough to fill both funeral cars, with Joe having to squeeze in the front seat of the hearse next to Lou Webster whom he'd known since school days.

"Okay, Lou?" he asked.

"Fine. Yourself, Joe?"

"Fine. Get a lot of cancellations in your line of business, do you?"

"Not a lot. In fact, it takes something unusual."

Joe contemplated eternity for another dignified furlong. But his mind kept drifting back to the cancellation.

"So what was unusual about this one?" he asked.

"Mr. Tallas? For a start, he died abroad."

"You say he was called 'Dallas'?"

"*Tallas.* It's Greek. That's where he was, in Greece, visiting his family. But seems he'd been born here, had British nationality, and wanted to be buried here. The insurance company — guy

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called Smith—rang to say it had to be postponed. Family complications. I wasn't best pleased, I tell you. One thing you can't afford in our game is smell."

Joe tried eternity again but it was no good.

"Smell?" he said.

"You know. Bad-meat smell. Mr. Tallas died in a car accident, probably all cut up and left out in the sun till they got round to shovelling him into a coffin, you know what these wops are like, all *mañana* out there."

"Think that's Spain, Lou," Joe pointed out gently.

"Is it? Won't fall out about a couple of miles. Anyway, first thing I noticed when I picked him up at the airport was the pong. You had to get up close but I've got a nose for it. I thought, hello. Don't want you lying around in my parlour too long."

Joe shuddered and looked behind him.

"No need to worry about Mr. Tooley. Time I'm finished with a client, you could sit him in your living room and keep him there for a month without anyone noticing, except he didn't move much."

"Got a girl on the cheese counter at the hyper like that," said Joe. "So what did you tell this insurance guy, Smith?"

"Said nothing till he rang to cancel this morning. I mean, he's paying. Has paid. Top dollar. But soon as he said there was a family travel problem and the funeral would have to be cancelled, I—said, that'll be extra for the inconvenience, and I'm not keeping him any longer than tomorrow else I'll have the Health round. I didn't tell him I'd already moved the coffin out of the Chapel of Rest and into my workshop."

Joe said, "How're you going to manage tomorrow? Not another cancellation?"

"No. We're doing first of the day, parish job, some poor derelict. Push him through in five minutes flat, slip the cream soup a bung, and we can easily fit in another long as they don't want no Friends-Romans and half the Messiah. Smith said fine, and if the family didn't make it, go ahead anyway."

Joe thought about this, slowly, as was his wont. It took him half a mile to work out that the cream soup was the crem supe, i.e. the crematorium superintendent. But there were other puzzles.

He said, "So if Smith's not that worried about the family making it, why not go ahead today anyway?"

"Don't ask me. All I know is, he's paying. Also it gave me a

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chance to do your auntie a favour. Wise man doesn't miss a chance like that."

Joe took his point. Mirabelle blacking an undertaker in Luton was like the bailiffs moving in.

He sat back and looked forward to the service.

It was more entertaining than he anticipated.

First off the chaplain, due doubtless to a late rebriefing, seemed unsure whether he was bidding farewell to Daniel Tooley, retired car mechanic and greyhound enthusiast, who'd died in the fullness of years, or David Tallas, company director, who'd been cut off in his prime. In the end he settled for David Tooley, a.k.a. Daniel Tallas, who'd been good to his family, generous to his employees, loyal to his friends, and kind to dumb animals, by all of whom he would be deeply missed.

If employees covered bookies, it would do for old Mr. Tooley, thought Joe.

Old Miss Tooley certainly showed no unease until the moment approached for the final curtain. But now she prodded Mirabelle in the ribs and hissed, "When will we be having 'Danny Boy,' Bella?"

Mirabelle, who hated being called Bella, asked what she thought she was talking about? Old Miss Tooley said it was universally known that Daniel wanted "Danny Boy" sung at his funeral. Mirabelle said it was the first she'd heard. Old Miss Tooley said Daniel wouldn't rest in his grave and *she'd* be laid low for weeks if the song wasn't sung. And Mirabelle, feeling the implied threat and nobly resisting the temptation to point out that, as old Mr. Tooley had expressed a wish for his ashes to be scattered over Trap 3 at the Luton Dog Track, resting in his grave hardly applied, looked at Joe.

"No," said Joe.

"You got no problem singing it down that hellhole drinking den you frequent, I see no reason for you to be shy in the House of the Lord," said Mirabelle.

And two minutes later Joe found himself standing alongside Mr. Tooley's basic-package coffin assuring its inmate that the pipes, the pipes were ca-alling.

In fact, it was no problem. As a longtime baritone in the famous Boyling Corner Chapel Choir and a popular contributor to karaoke night at The Glit, Joe could hold a tune and had performed before more interactive audiences than this. And sizewise,

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it wasn't bad either. In fact, there seemed to be quite a lot more people in the congregation than the nine or ten Mirabelle had crowded into the funeral cars. Perhaps she'd sent out a three-line whip throughout her wider sphere of influence beyond the Rasselas Estate. But Joe doubted it. There were folk here who didn't look like they belonged to Mirabelle's flock. Men in sharp suits with fifty-quid haircuts. Women to match.

As the final words of the song faded away, one of the mystery mourners, a handsome redheaded woman of about forty whose elegant silk suit showed she'd kept her figure in a way which Mirabelle probably considered an affront to both Nature and God, began to applaud.

Mirabelle turned and glowered, but nothing abashed, she got in three or four more hearty claps and gave Joe a smile whose warmth he felt like a turned-up fan heater.

Beside him the coffin was on the move. He returned to his seat leaving the bemused chaplain to resume centre stage. A blessing, a few moments silent prayer, then they were filing out to the piped strains of some mournful Muzak.

"Was I all right, Auntie?"

"All right for your drunken friends, maybe. No place in church for them vibratos. If you can't hit the note, you shouldn't be singing," she said sharply. Then, relenting, she said, "No, you were fine, Joe. I'm just mad at that *person* putting her hands together like she was at some pop concert."

A hand tugged at Joe's sleeve, a waft of powerfully musky perfume tugged at his nostrils, and he turned to find himself looking at that *person*. Behind her at the crem door he could see her male companion talking agitatedly to Lou.

"Looks like there's been a real cock-up," said the woman in a smoke-roughened voice which rubbed you up the right way. "Seems we've come to the wrong funeral, but it was worth it to hear you sing. Don't do gigs, do you?"

"No," said Joe, flattered by her implication and fluttered by her scented proximity. "Karaoke night down The Glit, and I'm in the Boyling Corner Choir."

"Never heard of them," she said. "I'm Mandy Levine, I run a little club out Barnet way. Thursday night's old-time night, always get a good crowd in, you'd go down well there. Here's my card if you think you might fancy it."

She laid her hand on his arm, gave him the warm smile, plus a

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promising squeeze and a saucy wink, then turned to join her friend, who seemed to be bringing the rest of the mystery mourners up to date. After a while they moved off en masse to the car park and dispersed in a snarl of Jags and BMWs.

On the way back, Joe said to Lou, "What was all that about then?"

The funeral director said, "Don't know and I don't want to know, and unless someone's paying you a lot of money to find out, I reckon you don't want to know either."

One of Joe's great strengths as a P.I. was that he never let bafflement bother him in the line of business. If, as often, he couldn't see the wood for the trees, he was usually quite content to rest peaceful in a clearing, confident that luck or instinct or a passing lumberjack would show him the way out.

But puzzles that were none of his concern either personally or professionally fascinated him.

He took out the card the woman had given him and studied it. It read *Mandy Levine, The Green Hat* plus a telephone number.

"That woman offered me a spot at her club," he said.

"Mandy Levine? I'd steer clear there."

"Why's that, Lou?" said Joe, getting a bit pissed with all this gratuitous advice.

"Because if it's your deep brown voice she's after, she'll rip you off. And if it's your deep brown dick she's after, Arnie, her husband, will do the ripping off."

"Arnie Levine? Sounds familiar. Tell me about him."

Lou laughed shortly. Perhaps it was okay once you'd got rid of the coffin.

"Nothing to tell," he said. "Except that colleagues of mine in north London reckon him and his mates are good for business."

Joe digested this. It was like ripe Camembert—nasty smell but compulsive.

"And that was Arnie giving you a row at the crem?"

"That's right. He and his friends were pissed off at not being told Mr. Tallas had been postponed."

"So why'd you not tell them?"

"Didn't know they were coming, did I? Mr. Smith from the Insurance said, quiet do, family only."

And his family lived in Greece. Where he'd died. Funny.

The funeral tea was a great success mainly because old Miss Tooley had insisted on laying in a supply of bottled Guinness and

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Irish whisky. When Mirabelle, who was as near teetotal as wouldn't have stirred the needle on a Breathalyzer, looked disapproving, Miss Tooley said, "Two things Daniel asked for in his will, one being the scattering of his ashes at the dog track—the other being that his friends should drink him *slainte,* and you can't do that in tay!"

Mirabelle took her revenge when the old lady, in response to a question about her travelling plans, announced that, to be sure, she ought to be getting back, but the planes to Belfast were so packed now the peace was here, she doubted if she could get a seat for several days more.

"I've some good news for you there, Miss Tooley," said Mirabelle, who'd just returned from her flat next door looking triumphant. "I've just been phoning my old friend Mrs. Marley's daughter who works on the booking desk at the airport and when I told her how desperate you were to get back home, she played with that machine of hers and came up with a ticket for you on the eight-thirty flight tomorrow morning."

"Eight-thirty?" said Miss Tooley in dismay. "Now how am I going to get up and find my way to the airport at such an ungodly hour?"

"Don't you fret, my dear," said Mirabelle. "I'll see you don't oversleep. And Joe here will drive you to the airport, won't you, Joe?"

Joe, having once again been given the proof that no one messed with Mirabelle, eschewed even token resistance and said, "My pleasure, Miss Tooley."

It looked like game, set, and match to the home team till at the height of what was now undeniably a party, Miss Tooley screamed, "The ashes! I can't go without scattering dear dead Daniel's ashes!" and collapsed in a fit of what Mirabelle termed the vaporizers.

Joe knew what was going to happen before it happened and was already heading out of the Tooley apartment when his aunt announced. "Don't you give that no nevermind, Miss Tooley. Joe will fetch them. And if you set out half an hour earlier, you'll have plenty of time for the scattering."

Joe looked at his watch. Quarter to seven. Would the ashes still be at the crem or would Lou have had them collected? Either way, would there be anybody in either spot to hand them over? For once in his life he acted sensibly and dived into Mirabelle's flat and picked up the phone.

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It rang ten times before it was picked up and Lou's professionally sepulchral tones announced, "Webster Funerals. How may I help you?"

"Lou, it's Joe. Listen, you got Mr. Tooley's ashes yet?"

"Yes. Made sure of it. Mirabelle said the old lady would be flying home very soon."

"Sooner than she thinks," said Joe. "Listen, we need 'em now. Any chance you could bring them round?"

"No way. It's the annual LAUFS dinner and I'm giving the address."

"Laughs?" said Joe. "Didn't know you did comedy, Lou."

"Luton Association of Undertaking and Funeral Services," said Lou. "And I'm late."

"Sorry," said Joe. "Any way I can collect them myself? It's a matter of death and death."

He'd hit the right note.

"What I'll do is leave the key to the workshop entrance, that's round the back by the garages, on the ledge above the door. The urn will be just inside. Lock up behind you and push the key through the front door. And don't hang about getting here. I get burgled, it's down to you."

"Thanks, Lou. I'll be there five minutes tops."

It was a lie. He knew it was a lie as soon as he got out into the cold night air and realized just how much he'd enjoyed of old Miss Tooley's Irish hospitality. The car was out, and the Rasselas Estate was not the kind of place that taxis cruised.

He set off walking, wasted time waiting for a bus, saw three sweep by in convoy when he was between stops, took a shortcut, got lost, and was resigning himself to the last indignity for a P.I. of having to ask his way when he saw the sign, Webster's Funerals.

He made his way round the back. There was a car parked in the shadow of the garages, a BMW. Lou must be doing well, thought Joe, glad it wasn't a hearse. He took out the pencil torch he carried and ran its finger of light over the door ledge till he found the key.

As he took it down and poked the finger of light into the keyhole, a distant clock struck eight.

Superstitiously, he felt mightily relieved it wasn't midnight.

The relief was short-lived.

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Midnight was nothing, a time to frighten kids with telling ghost stories round the fire.

When you were standing outside a darkened funeral parlour and the door swung open at the mere touch of the key, didn't matter what time of day it was, that was really scary.

He stepped inside, telling himself Lou had been careless and forgotten to lock the door. He didn't believe himself, but that didn't always mean he was wrong, any more than believing himself had ever meant he was right. He was in a long stone-flagged corridor. His torchlight dribbled onto an urn standing against the wall. He picked it up and gave it a little shake. It was full, presumably of Mr. Tooley.

Now was the time to withdraw, lock the door, and if in the morning it turned out someone had stolen all Lou's gilt-edged coffin handles, say, "Hey man, I'm sorry, but I didn't notice a thing."

He took a step backwards. And heard a noise.

It was not the kind of noise you wanted to hear in the kind of place he was hearing it in. It was sort of frictional, like wood being dragged across wood, as in, say, a coffin lid being dragged off a coffin. Also it was so loud you couldn't pretend you hadn't heard it, though he was doing his best.

Then came a second sound, this one human, like a gasp, or a groan, perhaps even a *yuck!*

Joe went cataleptic for thirty seconds, or it might have been thirty minutes. When the power of thought returned, he wished it hadn't, for it was a funny thing, but now that he was *really* scared, there was no choice but to go forward and take a look. Something wrong there, surely?

A lesser man might have used this interesting psychological contradiction as an excuse to stand still and ponder, but Joe's anti-intellectual feet were already carrying him steadily down the dark corridor. As he moved, he felt his senses sharpened by fear. He could feel the sensuous curve of the urn he was still carrying like a cupped breast; he could hear smaller sounds, rustling, heavy-breathing sounds; he could see the outline of the door behind which they were being made, and he could smell a whole complex of smells. In it were woodshavings and embalming fluid, the things you'd expect in such a place, plus a heavier, muskier, and somehow familiar perfume. And finally, as he gently pushed

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on the unresisting door, blotting all these out completely, he was hit by the foul and fetid stench of rotting flesh!

On the last turn of the hinge the door squeaked, and so did the redheaded woman standing by an open coffin with a funerary urn in her hands, and on her handsome face, lurid in the light of a fluorescent lantern perched on a workbench, an expression of mixed shock and guilt.

"Hello, Mrs. Levine," said Joe. "Still looking for talent?"

She recovered quickly, you had to give her that.

"Jesus Christ, it's you, the baritone blackbird! What the hell are you doing here? Not where you work, is it?"

As she spoke she put the urn on the workbench and from a large canvas toolbag removed a long slender screwdriver which glinted like a stiletto in the light. Joe eyed it uneasily.

"No," he said. "Actually, I'm a P.I., a private investigator."

And not someone you should mess with was his intended implication, but instead it sent her into peals of laughter.

"Hey, that makes you the Singing Detective," she gasped. "Even better billing than the Baritone Blackbird. Why don't we clear up here and go somewhere to talk about your career?"

"First you tell me what makes you so keen to take a last look at your friend, Mr. Tallas?" he said.

She smiled and glanced fondly into the coffin.

"David and I were once very close. Arnie never knew—he'd have killed me if he'd found out. So you see why I wanted to pay my last respects alone."

It was clearly crap, but spoken with such sincerity that Joe wasted a second working out the odds it was the truth. His abacus mind had difficulty computing the figures, and the effort of concentration must have switched off his fear-heightened senses for a second because it was a change in Mandy's expression rather than what must have been the not inconsiderable noise made by a man walking on crutches that alerted him to the danger behind.

He twisted round, fast enough to see but not to avoid the blow from the crutch handle. But at least the movement diverted it from the back of his head where it might have produced unconsciousness, to the side of his face where it just felt like he'd been kicked by a misanthropic mule. As he fell back, the man swung a plaster-cast leg at him. Joe scrabbled backwards across the tiled floor, and more by chance than judgment his left foot hooked around the man's other crutch, now bearing all his weight, and

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pulled it from under him. The man teetered for a moment and Joe, supine, hurled Mr. Tooley's urn at his chest.

There wasn't enough force in the projectile to do any damage, but the impact was enough to tip the balance and with a shrieked word which Joe didn't recognize but which sounded like an oath, his attacker fell backwards like a felled pine.

Joe closed his eyes in relief and opened them again to find the gleaming tip of Mandy Levine's screwdriver poised three inches above the left one, of which, being the stronger, he was particularly fond.

She was holding the implement in both hands and he did not doubt that the full weight of her generously structured upper deck could drive it via his eyeball into his almost paralysed brain.

But she wasn't looking down at him, she was looking towards the fallen figure of the intruder. Joe did not dare raise his head to follow her gaze, but his straining ears could hear no sound to indicate the man was preparing to return to the attack.

Then the bright blade wavered and the woman rose. Joe sat up quickly too, and winced as he found that Mr. Tooley's urn, as though in revenge for being so impiously misused, had rolled back between his legs. Holding it, Joe got groggily to his feet.

Mandy Levine was kneeling by the fallen man.

"Bring the light," she commanded.

She was, Joe guessed, a woman accustomed to being obeyed. He, being from long practice a man accustomed to obeying women accustomed to being obeyed, swapped the urn for the lantern and carried it over to her.

Expertly she raised the man's eyelids, examined his eyes, felt for a pulse in the neck, and said flatly, "Dead. You've killed him. Cracked his skull."

"Hang about," protested Joe. "It was an accident. He's dead, I'm sorry, but it wasn't my fault. Who the shoot is he, anyway?"

He knew the answer before she said it. Sometimes the impossible is also the inevitable.

"Tallas," she said. "David Tallas."

Joe went to the coffin and shone the lantern into it.

"Shoot," said Joe. Mirabelle's soapy-mouthwash aversion therapy had made this his strongest oath, but under provocation he could utter it with an intensity that would have won him style points in Billingsgate.

The coffin was a showy mahogany affair, with ornate gilt han-

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dles and the kind of brocade silk upholstery which, even though ripped so that the stuffing trickled through, must have cost an arm and a leg. Of arms there was no trace, but there were legs aplenty, four to be precise, all belonging to a deceased and decomposing goat.

It wasn't very big, barely more than a kid, but its bouquet was enormous.

"Mrs. Levine," said Joe, gagging. "Maybe you ought to tell me what's going on."

The woman slowly rose. Her foot kicked against one of the crutches. She picked it up and held it two-handed as she eyed Joe calculatingly.

Joe would have liked to be sure she was merely working out what to say to him, but the memory of the screwdriver poised over his left eye was still strong, and he had an uneasy feeling that she was still weighing war against jaw.

Words won, temporarily at least.

"I'll give it to you straight, Joe," she said in that husky, caressing voice. "The reason David here went to Greece was as agent for a little syndicate put together by my Arnie and his friends. He was good at that sort of thing, David. Could sell false teeth to tigers, and buy their stripes at the same time. There was a fair amount of money involved, hard cash money which he took with him, so imagine how Arnie and the others felt when they heard the news. David, driving from the airport in a hire car, had swerved on a mountain road to avoid a goat, bounced down the hillside, got thrown out, hit a rock, broke his neck, while the car had gone up in flames. Nothing left but unidentifiable ashes."

"To avoid a goat?" said Joe, glancing at the coffin.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. More chance of David avoiding a dirty weekend at the Ritz than swerving to avoid a goat. Came in useful though."

"So he faked his death to pocket the syndicate money?"

"You got it, Joe," she said admiringly.

"Must've taken some doing," said Joe dubiously. "I mean, even in Greece there must be regulations . . ."

"Sure there are. But the cousin who's his closest relative over there happens to be a police chief out in the sticks. Just the guy to know all the forms and formalities as well as all the fiddles. Wait till the goat's beginning to pong a bit so no one wants to get too close to the coffin, screw it down, and send it home. Easy."

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Joe pondered this, conscious of the woman's eyes upon him. He didn't have the kind of detective mind which made connections like a digital exchange, but put a goat in his path and he'd fall over it.

He said, "Easy, yeah. But not so easy as fixing a fake funeral in Greece. Lot less risky too. And why'd he come back himself? And how come if he faked the accident he's up to his hams in plaster? And why did he cancel the funeral today? And why's he hobbling round here trying to kill people? And just what the shoot are *you* doing here, Mrs. Levine?"

"Mandy," she said. "Call me Mandy. I like to be on first-name terms with people I do business with."

"We're doing business?" said Joe. "Have I missed something?"

She smiled and said, "Come on, Joe. No need to play quite so dumb, even when you've got the face for it."

She really did believe he knew what was going on. It was quite flattering. He turned away from her so that the bewilderment on his face didn't show quite so bright. And he found himself looking into the coffin again . . . the torn silk lining . . . the stuffing oozing out . . . powdery, white . . . what kind of stuffing did these Greek undertakers use anyway?

He licked his finger, touched it to the powder, tasted the grains on his tongue. They said it helped you see things clearly. It certainly worked for Joe Sixsmith.

"Smack," he said. "That's what he went to buy."

"That's right. Greece has got borders like a lace curtain. Most of the stuff pouring in from Pakistan and the East hits Europe there. But moving it on to where the big markets are is a lot harder, especially for the small-time operators. So David set up a deal to pay his cousin what was a small fortune in his terms, and buy enough shit to make Arnie and his chums a large fortune in their terms. It looked an all-round winner. Only David fancied a bit more than his commission. In fact, the lot, not just the money but the sell-on profit. And he could only get that by selling the stuff here."

"So he had to come back. And he used his own coffin to carry the heroin. Smart," said Joe, with genuine admiration. "But what went wrong?"

Mandy laughed.

"Apart from you cancelling his ticket, you mean?" she said. "Silly bugger got himself involved in a real accident here before he

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could arrange for a bit of quiet meditation by the dear deceased's coffin and remove the shit. He realized last night he was in no state to come and collect for himself, so he rang me at the club. I nearly had an accident too when I heard his voice, I tell you."

"Why'd he ring *you?"* asked Joe.

She smiled and gave him her saucy wink.

"Like I said, we were quite close once," she said.

"You didn't think of telling Arnie he was alive?"

"Why would I think of that? He'd just want to sort out Dave, and Dave's not such a gent he wouldn't let Arnie know what we'd been up to before he went under. No, keep stumm seemed best. I went to see him. Couldn't do anything last night, I was meeting Arnie later. So we fixed for him to cancel this morning, then he discharged himself from hospital this evening and I brought him along here. Don't think he trusted me by myself. He was sitting in my car, must have seen you coming in after me and thought he'd better hobble to the rescue, poor bastard."

"Doesn't sound like you're going to miss him."

"A bit. But I've mourned for him once, haven't I? And that's enough for any man. Question now is, what are we going to do, Joe?"

"No question," said Joe. "I'm going to go out of here and ring the police."

"No," she said, hefting the crutch. "Don't think so. Anyone rings the police, it's me."

"Sorry?"

"Mobile in the car. I go out there, say I think something terrible's happening. Got this call from David asking me to pick him up at the hospital. Didn't know what to make of it. He asked me to drive him round here, saying he'd explain everything. And we arrived to find the door already open. He went in. I heard a scuffle and rushed in to find you here, the coffin open, and David dead upon the floor. Think about it, Joe. Man just out of hospital against advice, in plaster and on crutches, gets cancelled by fully fit, highly qualified P.I. What kind of questions would that make the police ask, eh?"

Joe guessed that the main kind of question it would make the local force ask was, what the shoot did she mean by "highly qualified"?

But qualified or not, he knew a deal when he was being offered one.

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"What's the alternative?" he asked.

"Well, the way I see it, Joe, is, we've got a coffin with contents all legally certified as the body of David Tallas, deceased. And we've got the body of David Tallas, deceased."

It took his breath away, which he didn't mind as it gave a respite from dead goat.

"And the stuff in the coffin?"

"Plenty of room for both of them," said Mandy.

"I didn't mean the goat."

"Oh, the shit. Straight split? Or I'll take the lot, sell it, and then split the divvy with you?"

Joe considered for a moment.

There was a lot to be said for not getting mixed up with the police, some of whom would be glad of a chance to think the worst of him. Also, once it got public, however it panned out, he was going to end up as the man who'd made Arnie Levine unhappy, which he didn't mind doing so long as Arnie took his unhappiness to jail. But there was no offence he'd committed here.

He said, "You may be on to something, Mandy. Hang about."

He turned to the canvas tool bag on the workbench. She'd come well equipped. He took out an old-fashioned auger, drew a deep breath, and leaning over the coffin, began punching holes in the lining.

She watched approvingly for a while, then approval turned to puzzlement as he ran his tiny torch beam along the shelves which lined the wall till he saw what he wanted.

And puzzlement turned to horror as he unscrewed the top off a carboy of formalin and began to pour it into the coffin.

"What the hell . . . !"

"Nice mix," he said. "Mainline this and you'll get a high that will last forever!"

For a second he thought she was going to come at him and possibly hope that the coffin would take two. Then she shook her head and began to laugh.

"Okay," she said. "Do I take it this means I've got half a deal?"

"Why not?" he said. "I don't approve of wife beating."

"Arnie got wind of any of this, beating would be the easy option," she said grimly. "You want to take his feet? Okay. Lift!"

Five minutes later they were on their way out. As Joe locked the door he asked. "How'd you get in anyway?"

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She raised the canvas bag in which she was carrying her tools and lantern.

"Skeletons," she said. "Fitting, huh?"

"Don't get stopped," warned Joe. "Going equipped's a crime."

"Hope not, Joe," she laughed. "I always go equipped. Like a lift?"

"No thanks. I'm parked round the corner," he lied.

"Okay. Take care, Joe. And if you ever do decide you'd like a try-out at my club, you've got my number."

He watched the car lights vanish out of the yard, then took a deep breath of the lovely cold odourless night air. It felt good to be out here alone, with Mandy Levine moving away from him at a rate of knots and a strong locked door between himself and that coffin with all its grisly freight . . .

And the thought put him in mind of Mr. Tooley's ashes, resting quiet in their urn, back inside on the workbench top where he'd left it.

"Oh shoot!" said Joe Sixsmith.

Next morning he stood with old Miss Tooley in front of Starting Gate 3 at the Luton Dog Track.

Joe tested the wind with a damp finger and said, "I think we'd be better the other side."

"I take your point," said Miss Tooley. "Dearly though I loved Daniel, I don't fancy taking him home in my eye. Give us the urn, Joe."

He handed it over.

She said, "Thanks, Joe. And thanks for everything. You've all been so kind to me. I'll miss you all like my own legs. But it's no distance at all now I've found you. Tell Mirabelle I'll be back to see her as soon as I can manage."

"She'll look forward to that," said Joe.

"I know she will. Soul of hospitality, your aunt. I didn't think I would take to her so much at first, but it shows how wrong you can be about people, doesn't it, Joe?"

"It certainly does," said Joe. He was thinking of Mandy Levine. Okay, he wouldn't have liked to have given her the choice of himself dead and David Tallas alive. But he could admire a realist, someone who could look at how things stood and accept whatever the fates threw up with a smile. She'd taken his trick with the formalin pretty well considering he'd ruined what must have been close on a million quids' worth of dope, street value. Yes, a feisty

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lady, as they said. Perhaps he would take up her offer of a spot at her club . . . after all, it had been made before any of that business last night . . .

Miss Tooley had unscrewed the top of the urn and was peering inside.

"Ah, that's good," she said. "You hear such tales of people finding eggshells and clinker, but I see that Daniel's burnt down to a fine white ash, just as I'd have expected. You can see the pure living just by looking at what he's become."

She held out the urn so Joe could share the experience.

He looked at the fine white powder it contained with the rapt expression of a man seeing eternity.

What he was actually seeing was Mandy Levine when he first interrupted her in the funeral workshop. She'd been holding an urn which she had then placed on the workbench. Where he later had placed Mr. Tooley's remains.

No wonder Mandy had taken his sabotage of her hopes of great profit so well! Not trusting the slippery Tallas to give her the promised split, she'd already stashed herself a nice little nest egg in the nearest handy receptacle. But she'd picked up the wrong urn.

Joe hoped that she'd discover her mistake before she tried to trade old Mr. Tooley on to some hardnosed dealer.

Whatever, he thought it best to postpone his professional singing debut just a little while longer.

He settled down to watch that remarkable old lady, Miss Tooley, scatter about a hundred grand's worth of pure smack into Trap 3. The wind carried most of it away, but not all.

They stood with their heads bowed for a moment.

Old Miss Tooley said, "I'd have liked him to have some sort of lasting monument, but this is what he wanted. And I'm sure his friends will not forget him."

"No indeed," said Joe. "In fact, I was thinking I might come here tonight and back the 3 dog through the card, just as a kind of tribute."

"Now that's a lovely thought," said old Miss Tooley. "You're a darling boy, Joseph. Put a fiver on for me, for I'm sure the Lord will be after smiling down on such a kind and loving gesture."

And Joe, looking down at the scattering of white over the ground inside Trap 3, said, "I think He's smiling already, Miss Tooley." ●

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Art by Ron Chironna

THE LADY FISH MYSTERY

by Mary Reed and Eric Mayer

In Ulaan Baatar's Chinatown, a crisp staccato of firecrackers welcomed the Year of the Dog. To Inspector Dorj, making his way slowly down the crowded street, it seemed that every one of the thousand Chinese who remained in the Mongolian capital had turned out for the celebration.

Swept from Ulaan Baatar to the Gobi Desert by the twin cold winds of social revolution and reassignment, Inspector Dorj felt something of that hunger for home which all exiles know. But now that he had returned for a long-awaited visit he felt like a stranger. Was it the Chinese faces, or was Dorj becoming accustomed to the sparsely inhabited desert outside his new

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posting at Dalanzadgad?

The city felt as cold as the desert. Around him, smoke from firecrackers mingled with the crowd's frozen, misty breath. Red banners decorated with gold ideograms snapped in the same bitter wind that plastered his thin trousers to the backs of his legs.

Dorj stopped and stood with his back against the concrete-block wall of a bicycle shop. Across the wide avenue from him loomed one of the capital's ponderous Soviet-built apartment blocks. Could it be the one he had come looking for?

This second installment in the adventures of Mongolian police detective Dorj finds the inspector back from his posting in the Gobi desert for a short holiday in his home city, Ulaan Baatar. But its the time of the Chinese New Year celebrations, and in Ulaan Baatar's Chinatown, Dorj's detecting skills are called into play. The authors, a team of Rochester writers, beautifully evoke the color of the occasion.

Over the entrance someone had constructed a makeshift red canopy, decorated with red bats. Was it part of the celebration? Dorj reached back into his memories. The red bats, he recalled, symbolized happiness and joy. A wedding was planned, that was it. White was not associated with Chinese weddings. It was a funeral color.

A young Chinese girl passed through his line of vision and for a moment he mistook her for someone else. He was a rookie policeman again. And his eyes were suddenly wet. It was the cold wind, he told himself. He removed his eyeglasses and ran a gloved hand across his eyes. When he looked back at the apartment block he returned to the present. The bride had arrived in a red bridal chair, borne on poles by four young men. Another young man was aiming a bow at the chair.

Ceremoniously, he shot three arrows under the chair. What was it Mai had said, years ago? It was against any evil entering with the bride, something like that.

More firecrackers exploded. Larger ones this time. Dorj had watched long enough. He moved away from the bicycle shop and continued down the avenue. If anything, the crowd seemed even

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noisier than it had before. Someone shouted something in Chinese. There seemed to be some disturbance near the Dollar Shop at the corner.

Even on vacation, Dorj was prepared for police work. The inspector forced his way through the crowd with practiced skill.

A knot had formed halfway down the alley beside the shop. Dorj pushed aside one of the celebrants who stood slumped, his red banner dragging on the ground.

The crowds had not trampled all the snow out of the alleyway yet and around the crumpled body lying there, the snow was stained with blood which was very red, and very real—not symbolic of anything.

"Tea?" inquired Captain Ariunbat. He grasped the teapot with pudgy fingers encircled by several heavy-looking rings. He was heavy himself, and soft-looking. Perhaps that was why he had chosen to suffix his name with "bat," which in Mongolian means "solid." Dorj settled into a metal folding chair in front of the cluttered metal desk in his host's sparsely furnished office and accepted a cup of salty, milky tea. He had not really expected to be visiting police headquarters during his vacation. It too brought back memories.

"I apologize for interrupting your vacation," said Ariunbat. "But since you were on the scene shortly after the murder—"

"It's all right," said Dorj, not meaning it.

"You were in Chinatown for the celebration?"

"Actually I was taking a walk." More like a pilgrimage, Dorj thought to himself. "I once knew someone who lived in the area."

Dorj didn't remember the captain. He wondered from which *aimag* he'd been transferred. He had the grayish blue eyes and vaguely Western look of a native Kazakh.

"The dead man," resumed Ariunbat, "was a Mr. Deng Liu. One of the leading lights of the Chinese community here in the capital."

"An entrepreneur," said Dorj. "I understood he owned several Dollar Shops—quite lucrative until the new government required them to accept tugriks rather than dollars. Didn't he also have interests in mining ventures?"

Ariunbat regarded Dorj with some surprise. "You seem well informed. But, of course, you once worked here."

"I was fortunate enough to dine with Liu and his family a couple

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of times. Oddly enough, the last time was also as the year turned. I remember we had Nien Fan, one of those traditional dishes for the occasion. It was rice with dried fruit, and a persimmon perched on top."

"Persimmon?"

"Well, as we know, he is, was, well off. I must admit I didn't care for the taste much." Dorj sipped his salty tea.

"No. The Chinese have strange tastes." Ariunbat leafed slowly through the papers on his desk, as if it were an effort. "At any rate, Mr. Liu died around three o'clock this afternoon at the Russian Polyclinic. He was shot—as you know—around two P.M.—" The Captain paused. "In what used to be Gorky Street. Though they've gone and renamed it, I understand. Did you notice a sign?"

"No," said Dorj. "All the signs seem to have vanished. Any idea who the murderer might be?"

Ariunbat gave a tired shrug. "Probably one of his countrymen, although there's a lot of bad blood between the Chinese and our people."

"They seem to have caught on to this free enterprise idea more quickly than we did," noted Dorj.

Ariunbat ignored the remark. He stirred some extra milk into his cup of tea. He said, "A few months ago we tracked down a man who'd embezzled from Liu, a man named Chi, so it isn't beyond reason that—well—Chi killed himself, you see, couldn't stand the shame and did the honorable thing. Jumped into the Tuul. Left two sons and an ailing wife. So maybe it's revenge. We've questioned Lui's family. He had a daughter—Song Liu—although his wife was dead. But then, you probably know that."

"Yes," agreed Dorj. "She was just a child when I knew him."

"She's engaged now," said Ariunbat. "Works in a bookstore near the park. She gave a statement. She says that her father had been unwell, and was rather distracted this morning. He went out about nine, saying he would be back later, but of course he never returned."

"What about the notebook?" asked Dorj.

"Oh yes." From under a pile of papers, he produced a pocket-size, leather-bound notebook. "Did you get a chance to examine it when you picked it up?"

"I only glanced at it."

Ariunbat pushed the book across his cluttered desk, ignoring the papers which fell on the floor. "What do you make of it?"

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Dorj picked the book up and opened it at the space allotted for that day, where there was a small drawing of a fish with wavy lines around its head.

Ariunbat said, "There are other days marked the same way, about every three weeks this past year. Some kind of Chinese accounting method?"

Dorj pondered a moment. "Did the daughter know anything about these fish markings?"

"No, except that she said it was a *'mei ren yu,'* whatever that is."

"You have to say it rather more nasally," said Dorj. He looked out the window for a moment, not seeing Central Square and the heroic statue of Sukhe Baatar, but thinking instead of a young Chinese girl who had coached him in Mandarin for a regrettably brief time. Mai's lessons had been considerably less formal than those conducted by his Soviet instructors at the Mongolian State University. "As to what it means," he said, "it means 'beautiful lady fish,' or, in other words, a mermaid."

"A mermaid? But we're nowhere near an ocean! And how is it you speak a bit of Mandarin anyway?" Ariunbat made it sound like an accusation.

Dorj smiled uncomfortably. He did not care to share much of his past with the man. "It was a personal interest of mine, once," he said.

Ariunbat tapped his cup slowly. "But why a mermaid?"

"It's puzzling. Many Chinese mariners consider them unlucky. Liu was such a traditionalist that I can't see him starting the new year by inscribing an unlucky symbol into his diary for the very day that it begins, so there must have been a more pressing reason. I would guess it was a memory aid."

"Well," said Ariunbat, "considering your obvious interest in Chinese culture, I'm sure I could use your assistance in interviewing the daughter."

"Ah," said Dorj, wishing he hadn't mentioned the persimmon.

The next morning Dorj accompanied Ariunbat to the northern suburb where the late Mr. Liu's daughter lived. They bicycled. Fuel was too scarce to squander except in emergencies. Ariunbat rode a fancy ten-speed model, while Dorj had to content himself with a battered police issue with balloon tires. Despite his bulk, Ariunbat pedaled expertly, even braking neatly to avoid a cow grazing on some frozen grass in front of the Altai Hotel. He wore a

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set of headphones and Dorj wondered what he was playing on his portable cassette machine, but didn't ask.

Song Liu lived in the fourth in a line of *gers*. Dorj had always preferred his solid, cozy—and thankfully square—apartment to the traditional circular, tentlike structures of white felt. But, he knew, most Mongolians aspired to their own suburban *gers*, complete with electricity.

The policemen left their bicycles beside the gate of the fenced-in yard surrounding the *ger*. Ariunbat knocked on the elaborately carved wooden door. Song Liu answered. She was a pale, pretty girl, not unlike Mai, Dorj thought.

"Wai," said Dorj, dredging his memory for the greeting.

"You speak some Chinese, too?" The words were spoken in English by a large, overhearty American who appeared suddenly beside the Chinese girl. His handshake almost dislocated Dorj's arm. "Pleased to meet you, Inspector," his new acquaintance twanged. "Myron Young's the name, here's my card. Song here has been teaching me the odd phrase."

"Sorry to disturb you," said Ariunbat, in Mongolian. "We'll try to be brief."

The two policemen and Song took wooden chairs beside the stove in the center of the *ger*. Young positioned himself protectively behind Song's chair. Dorj noticed that the shelves and tables that sat against the *ger*'s crisscrossed wooden framework were burdened incongruously with the type of bric-a-brac usually found in tourist shops.

While Ariunbat offered condolences to Song, Dorj looked at the business card he had been handed. Apparently Mr. Young was a mining engineer—an associate of the late Mr. Liu.

"Did your father have any enemies?" Ariunbat asked Song.

The girl shook her head. "So far as I know, none, at least among the Chinese community."

Dorj and Ariunbat exchanged glances. Was she suggesting that a Mongolian was responsible for her father's death? There was tension between the Mongolians and Chinese. More than one Chinese had been beaten by gangs, usually drunks. But things had been quiet for a while.

"Your father—he was a man of mild temperament, not likely to get into an argument, say?" Ariunbat asked.

"He never lost his temper, not even when Myron—Mr. Young, that is, wished to marry me."

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"Dear!" the engineer said, "I don't think we ought to—"

"Nonsense!" was the brisk reply. Dorj blinked. For a family so traditional to have such a modern-thinking girl seemed odd. "We must tell the truth about everything."

Ariunbat's pencil hovered hopefully over his notepad. "And that is—?"

"Well, my father was not happy about the idea. He wished for me to have an arranged marriage to one of his friends. But I didn't want to. I wanted to go to America with Myron."

Dorj sighed. Another young woman seeking her dreams in a foreign land. She seemed remarkably composed, less than a day after her father's death. Maybe, thought Dorj, her grief was tempered by the removal of an impediment to her plans.

"Anyhow," Song continued, "my father was adamant that we could not marry, and he sent Myron to look into a silver mine in Olgii."

Dorj was familiar with the place, in the far reaches of the country on the border of Kazakhstan. The highest form of culture it boasted was a cinema that tended to show Indian films without subtitles.

"That's right," Young confirmed. "Song and I were separated for six weeks. We couldn't even talk—except when the phones were working."

"My father wasn't himself recently," added Song. "He had been ill, I think, but he didn't like to discuss such things. Bad luck. I'm sure he would have changed his mind."

Ariunbat nodded. "And, Mr. Young, what are you doing in Mongolia?"

"Joint mining venture with Mr. Liu. At least that's what my company hoped for. Your country has plenty of untapped resources, Captain. Money to be made there. We'll have you all living in proper houses before you know it."

"Certainly," said Ariunbat. "When did you return from Olgii?"

"Late last night. I have a room in the Ulaan Baatar Hotel. Rolled into bed and went out like a light. Firecrackers woke me up. It was an awful racket. Drums and people yelling New Year greetings. Like I said, Song's taught me a little Mandarin. I decided to head into Chinatown."

Ariunbat scowled thoughtfully.

"This was around eight A.M.," Young explained quickly. "I wanted to see the lion dance."

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"We may need to talk to you further," said Ariunbat, rising from his chair with some difficulty.

The big American accompanied them out the door. When they were outside he leaned forward confidentially, lowering his voice. "While I was in Chinatown yesterday morning, I overheard something that you may find useful. There were two Chinese boys behind me—teenagers—and I caught a bit of their conversation. Mr. Liu's name came up. Well, as you can imagine, that caught my interest. One of the boys said something about getting 'a black pearl.' And then there was something else about a *'yee chuan'*—an inheritance. And it must've been a big one because they were talking a million cash—paper money. So I began to wonder, were they planning a robbery?"

"Why didn't you go to the police?" asked Ariunbat.

"I guess I couldn't really believe what I was hearing. Figured it was probably my imagination, or maybe I'd misheard. But I came straight back here to warn him anyhow. He'd left before I got here."

"What did these boys look like?"

"They looked like—well—Chinese boys." Young paused to think for a moment. "They were dressed in red. I do remember that."

"Yes, I saw any number of boys dressed in red yesterday afternoon," said Dorj. "Part of the celebrations. But why would a couple of teenagers be discussing Mr. Liu's finances?"

The two policemen had stopped for lunch at the Altai Hotel. Ariunbat removed his goose-down jacket, turned his attention to his plate of boiled mutton, and vigorously began to make up for his bicycling exercise. Dorj had planned on attending a production of *Hamlet* at the Drama Theater but that, apparently, was not to be. At any rate, hearing about the wished-for marriage between Song Liu and the foreigner, Young, had raised a personal ghost. Where was Mai now, he wondered? Had she and her family weathered the Cultural Revolution? Did she ever wish they had stayed in Mongolia?

"I wonder," said Ariunbat, "if they might have been Chi's sons? The embezzler had two sons. They might've heard their father talking about Liu's wealth."

"So revenge would've been a motive, as well as robbery."

"What other Chinese boys would've had that kind of information? It's obvious."

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"Yes, obvious," agreed Dorj.

"What do you say, Dorj," said Ariunbat. "I could pull the sons in for questioning, and maybe he'd recognize them."

"He might. Of course, it might have just been the usual violent drunks—nothing to do with the conversation Young overheard."

"And what about the American?" continued Ariunbat. "I checked at his hotel. He did arrive when he said, but as to the next day—the day of the murder—well, you know how our hotels are run." He wiped grease from his lips.

"Mr. Liu was apparently standing in the way of Young's marriage to Song."

"But can you see him killing off his business partner? Besides, the girl said she expected her father to come around to the idea when he felt better."

"It's a difficult case," said Dorj. There was something wrong that he couldn't quite identify. Was it Song's odd composure? Or something about those queer fishlike markings in the notebook? Were they in any way related to the murder?

He found himself thinking again about the wedding he'd witnessed. But something else—the girl who'd reminded him momentarily of Mai. Could it have been Song?

Dorj felt suddenly depressed, hemmed in. He almost missed the desert—cold and scoured clean by the winds off the massifs.

The next day, the local telephone service being what it was, Dorj simply walked unannounced into the dark, uninviting store where Song Liu worked. Her job was as seemingly at odds with her late father's wealth as the family *ger*. But then the Chinese were reputed to be industrious. Unlike the grocery stores', the bookstore's shelves were full, but the books were dusty, and mostly in Russian.

When he saw her kneeling to arrange some maps on a low shelf, he recalled when he and Mai had spent hours browsing bookstores. Not long afterwards, he found himself sitting on a bench with Song, next to the Ferris wheel in Nairamdal Park.

"Yes, I was in Chinatown that afternoon," admitted Song. She was not so pale. The cold, perhaps, had brought color to her high cheekbones. The bright but ineffectual sun high up in the vast, bright blue sky shone in her dark hair. "I . . . I stayed at Myron's hotel the night before."

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"What about your father?" Dorj felt an irrational pang of jealousy.

"Oh, Father would have been furious if he'd known. I told him I was staying with friends. Myron had to go out early, on business, he said."

"But you stayed in Chinatown for a time?"

"I was watching the celebrations. I knew nothing about the . . ." Her voice broke and she closed her eyes tightly.

Dorj stared at the Ferris wheel, recalling it in summer, filled with children excited to be carried just a little way up into that blue sky.

"I didn't tell you the whole truth," said Song abruptly. "I said Father was ill. He was dying."

Dorj looked at her questioningly.

"He'd told me," Song continued. "We'd made all the arrangements. That was just before he sent Myron away. I wouldn't have put up with it otherwise. I would've married Myron on the spot. But I knew Father wasn't himself. And how could I—Oh, if he'd only given us his blessing before—"

She began to cry and leaned against Dorj's shoulder. He put his arm around her, uncomfortably.

Dusk was falling when Dorj and Ariunbat reached the Tuul River bridge on what had once been Marx Avenue. Ariunbat stopped and climbed off his bicycle. "The restaurant's in the next block," said Ariunbat, who had invited Dorj to discuss the case over dinner. "It's excellent. I go there often."

Ariunbat glanced at his watch, illuminated by fitful greenish light from a sputtering streetlamp, and leaned against the balustrade. The river was frozen, except where it eddied around the piers of the bridge. He said, "You can see the lights of the city from here."

"Have you pulled in those two brothers?" asked Dorj.

"Not yet."

"I think you should abandon Chi's family and look a little closer to home."

Ariunbat was incredulous. "Surely you don't mean . . . No, I can't see a little fragile flower like her being involved in patricide."

"I wasn't thinking of Song."

"The engineer—Young?"

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"Yes. I find myself thinking about the conversation he overheard."

The captain nodded, his double chin trembling. "And . . . ?"

"Red is the color of joy."

Ariunbat looked at Dorj as if the inspector had gone mad.

"In China, red symbolizes joy," explained Dorj. "Chi's sons would hardly be wearing red so soon after their father's death."

"Do you mean Young made the conversation up?"

"Not necessarily the conversation itself."

"But if it wasn't the sons—"

"Has it occurred to you that Myron Young sounds a lot like *'mei ren yu'?"*

"Well, it does when you say it, yes. So what?"

"The mermaid symbols in the notebook," said Dorj. "They might have been a sort of code for Myron Young."

"But why?"

"I'm sure you know that the Dollar Shops were highly profitable when they were actually dollar shops—when they only accepted foreign currency. Most of them were put out of business when our new leaders decided to force them to accept tugriks instead."

"That's true."

"And it wasn't so long after that decree that Mr. Liu put you onto an embezzler."

"So?"

"Well, there wasn't any embezzler. I suspect Liu tinkered with the books to try and stay afloat and called you with that embezzler story as a smokescreen. Unfortunately, you apprehended a suspect. Young must've found out all about it somehow. He was blackmailing Liu. Maybe the mermaid symbols marked dates for payments. In which case they were due to meet on the day Liu was murdered. I'll bet the Dollar Shop off the alley where Liu died was a store he owned."

Ariunbat pushed his bulk away from the balustrade. "But why would Young kill a man he was milking like that?"

"Maybe he was afraid he'd be found out. Maybe he wanted everything at once. He got impatient for the inheritance he planned to get his hands on by marrying Liu's daughter."

"And where did he hear about this inheritance if it wasn't from those boys?"

"Song told me Mr. Liu was dying. She and her father discussed funeral arrangements. I imagine Young came calling at the *ger*

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and overheard—and misunderstood—considering he knows only a little Mandarin."

"Misunderstood? But what about the 'black pearl,' the paper money, the inheritance?"

"A black pearl is part of Chinese funeral rites. The paper money that was supposedly an inheritance is the paper money they burn for the dead."

The streetlight buzzed and flickered. Dorj thought he could see surprise in Ariunbat's blue eyes. Eyes that suddenly reminded him of something he'd forgotten, a connection he'd failed to make.

The crunch of footsteps on the icy roadway made Dorj turn. It was Myron Young.

"Never was much good at foreign languages," said Young. "Hell of a thing. Still, the old man must've left something."

Dorj said, "Are you proposing to shoot me with the gun you used to kill Liu?"

"That's not a bad idea," said Young. "But, no. We had something different in mind."

"As you recall, our embezzler, Mr. Chi, jumped into the Tuul," said Ariunbat, and Dorj felt a meaty arm close around his throat.

The inspector's feet left the ground as Ariunbat swung him toward the balustrade. Dorj glimpsed a patch of swirling black water surrounded by snow-covered ice. Then a gunshot cracked the silence and Ariunbat crumpled.

Dorj, always prepared, even while vacationing, scrambled free of the dying man's grasp and aimed his police revolver at Young who raised his hands obligingly.

"I'm an American," said Young. "I've got a right to a lawyer. What time is it in Houston?"

"Yes, they were both blackmailing your father," Dorj told Song. "Ariunbat had met Young in Olgii, during one of Young's previous trips to the silver mine there. Ariunbat's a Kazakh—he has the look, the blue eyes. After he was transferred to Ulaan Baatar, he and Young must have gotten together. The conversation probably turned, naturally enough, to your father's embezzler. Ariunbat had the doctored records and his police investigations, Young had some business smarts. Between the two of them they figured out what was going on and decided to take advantage.

"When Young misinterpreted the conversation about funeral arrangements, their plan changed. They wanted it all at once.

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They also wanted to pin the murder on Chi's sons, but it seemed to me Ariunbat was a little too quick to pretend to connect them with the crime."

"My father was horrified when Chi died," said Song. "He never expected that. I'm sure he intended to tell Ariunbat not to press charges."

"That is probably true," said Dorj, who knew from experience there was no predicting what people might do when it came to money.

He stood with Song and members of Liu's family on the junction of two temporarily unnamed streets. Song, dressed in funeral white, blended in with the freshly fallen snow that gave even Ulaan Baatar a sparkling sheen of promise.

Song's eyes were watery. But she was remarkably calm. No doubt she had been steeling herself for her father's imminent death for weeks. It had come only a bit sooner, and much differently than she'd expected. And, Dorj thought ruefully, the gunshot had been kinder in the end than cancer would have been. But he kept that to himself.

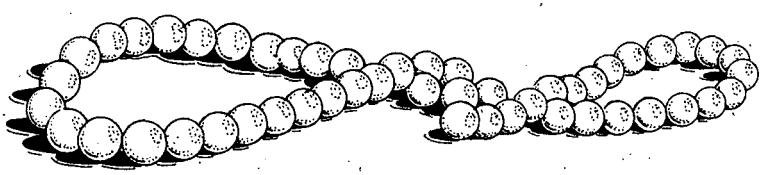
Mr. Liu's funeral procession came down the street, the white-draped coffin followed by mourners, all in white, bearing white banners inscribed with the character for "life." Some of the onlookers threw paper money into the cold air.

When the procession had passed, Dorj said, "I won't be able to come to the cemetery. My plane will be leaving and—well—you have to catch flights when they have the fuel to make them."

"Thank you," said Song.

"Maybe next time I'm in Ulaan Baatar, you might like to see a play," said Dorj, realizing the inappropriateness of the remark even as he spoke. But the girl nodded.

He reached back into his memory again. *"Zai-jan,"* he said. "Goodbye." ●



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The Lazarus Gate

by George C. Chesbro

George Chesbro's best-known creation is the dwarf private eye Mongo, a character whose adventures are larger than life and evoke, as William L. DeAndrea said in *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*, the era of the pulps. Similarly larger than life, with an almost supernatural ability to intuit things, is ex C.I.A. op Veil, a character Mr. Chesbro gives the starring role in the following story. ✝

Veil dreams.

Vivid dreaming is his gift and affliction, the lash of memory and a guide to justice, a mystery and sometimes the key to mystery, prod to violence and maker of peace, an invitation to madness and the fountainhead of his power as an artist.

The Lazarus Person standing under the streetlight on the sidewalk outside the former warehouse Veil Kendry owned was an attractive woman in her late thirties or early forties. From the vast loft on the fourth floor where he painted and lived, Veil watched her through the one-way glass of his window. Although her face was impassive and her expression distant, he sensed her discomfort. Despite the fact that this was New York City's East Village, the woman was not in danger, for Veil had taken steps when he had first bought the building fifteen years before to make sure that the few blocks surrounding his building were crime-free; drug dealers and others who committed violent crimes in his immediate neighborhood invariably chose not to return a second time, and some disappeared altogether. There was no bus stop in the middle of the block, no apparent reason for her to be standing there for almost forty-five minutes, and the fact that she was a Lazarus Person made him doubly suspicious. If she somehow knew about him and wanted to talk, she had only to press the buzzer at the entrance on the ground floor.

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When an hour had passed and the woman still had not moved, Veil went to the telephone and called Dr. Sharon Solow at home. She was not there, and her answering machine did not come on. When there was no answer at her office in the Sleep Research Laboratories at St. Vincent Hospital, he went down to his arsenal of weapons and equipment on the third floor. He took a pair of night-vision binoculars off a shelf, turned off the lights, and went to a window at the front. First he scanned the rooftops of the buildings across the street, but saw no one there. In the darkened doorway of a storefront directly across the way, however, he spotted a man standing by himself, and he was wearing headphones. Veil peered into the night on the other three sides of the building, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Satisfied that the watcher and listener in the doorway was alone, Veil left the building through a freight-delivery entrance at the rear, went to the end of the block, around the building, and crossed the street, then came up on the man as silently as a shadow within the shadows and hit him in the solar plexus. As the man doubled over and gasped for air, Veil grabbed the back of his coat collar and marched him across the street. The woman now looked sad, and she remained motionless, watching him as he approached.

"I'm sorry," the woman said quietly as Veil dragged the man up over the curb and shoved him toward the entrance to his building. "The man in green said he would—"

"You don't have to explain," Veil interrupted. "I know you meant me no harm, and I know you didn't agree to act as a lure out of concern for your personal safety. I promise you they won't threaten your family again. You're free to go. There's a subway station a few blocks north of here, and you'll be safe walking there."

The woman nodded, then turned and disappeared into the night. Veil pulled the man through the doorway into his building, then shoved him hard against the doors of the freight elevator in the small foyer. He closed the entrance door behind him, then turned to the man, who had slumped to the floor and was still holding his stomach. The expression on his face was a mixture of fear and wonder. He had fiery red hair, green eyes, and thick fields of freckles on his cheeks and forehead. Veil estimated him to be in his mid twenties, although he could have passed as a teenager—a potentially dangerous teenager who, for some reason, was prying into some very dangerous secrets.

"My God!" the young man said excitedly, shaking his head and

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licking his lips. "It's true! You recognized what she was! The two of you must be able to com—!"

"Stop jabbering, or I'll smack you again," Veil said curtly. "Who the hell are you?"

The young man with the red hair and green eyes swallowed hard, then removed his headphones, which hung askew around his neck. A single droplet of sweat had appeared in the center of his forehead. "I . . . won't tell you anything. You can't make me."

Veil grunted. "Really? You look awfully young to be working in the field for the CIA, but when you reach middle age just about everybody starts looking young."

"I said I wouldn't—" The young man stopped speaking and cried out as Veil abruptly grabbed the lapels of his overcoat and yanked him to his feet, once again slamming him against the slatted elevator doors. "Are you going to torture me?"

"Nah," Veil replied evenly. "I hate torture. I don't mind torturing torturers, but you don't look like one of those. But I will show you a trick your chiropractor probably doesn't even know."

Veil jerked the other man around and cupped his chin with his left hand. He twisted the man's neck at the same time as he pressed hard with the heel of his right hand against a precise point on the man's spine. There were sharp popping sounds in the man's neck and back, and he collapsed to the floor.

The man in the overcoat sat on the floor with his legs splayed and his weight balanced on his hands as he stared up into the glacial blue eyes of the rangy man with the shoulder-length, gray-streaked yellow hair who stood over him. What he saw there was death, or worse. He glanced down and began to cry when he saw the puddle of urine forming between his legs. "I'm peeing myself and I can't even feel it," he sobbed. "You've paralyzed me."

"Incontinence is the least of your worries, sonny. Right now you're at least a candidate for a wheelchair. If you don't give simple, straight answers to my questions, you're going to end up being wheeled around on a hospital gurney for the rest of your life. As you may have noticed, I don't bluff, and I rarely even bother to threaten. Now, if you don't want me to shut the rest of you down, stop slobbering and tell me your name."

The young man cut off a sob, breathed, "Denny Whalen."

"All right, Denny Whalen, you work for the CIA, of course. Ops?"

"Yes and no."

"Give me the no part first."

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"We don't do . . . nasty stuff. No covert operations. We're organized under Operations, but we're strictly research."

"What's your outfit called?"

"Department of Human Possibilities."

"I make it my business to keep up with these things, and I've never heard of you. You need another spinal adjustment?"

"We used to be called the Bureau of Unusual Human Resources."

"Ah yes," Veil said, and sighed. "BUHR. The 'chill shop.' I thought the dwarf put you people out of business last year."

"We've been . . . reorganized."

"Right. Just what the world needs now: a reorganized 'chill shop.' If you're not a field operative, what were you doing with eavesdropping equipment outside my building tonight?"

"It was an experiment. The woman was wired, and I would have heard anything you said to her. I had to see for myself if it was true that Lazarus People recognize each other and are capable of some degree of telepathic communication. I wanted to see if you'd come down—which you did. You two didn't have a real conversation, but you did recognize what she was."

"You're a damn fool, Denny Whalen. How the hell did BUHR find out about Lazarus People? The Lazarus Project was a decade ago, and all the records were destroyed."

"The Lazarus Project was mentioned in KGB files. A lot of their people are working for us now, and they brought a lot of their records with them."

"If you've got reports on the Lazarus Project, then you should know it was a complete bust. You can't get to where they wanted to go from here."

"The files are incomplete and spotty. You killed the two KGB operatives who were at the institute and on the army base."

"So I did. You're holding Dr. Solow?"

Denny Whalen again swallowed hard, nodded.

"Kidnapping sounds like nasty business to me, Denny, and it was a very, very bad idea. Where have you got her?"

"A safe house on the Upper West Side. The address is—"

"I know where it is. Has she been harmed?"

"No."

"How lucky for you. How is it that the director of Ops authorized a kidnapping by a bunch of research scientists?"

"Ops has given top priority to finding out exactly what happened with the Lazarus Project. You must have really rattled

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some cages in the past, because nobody wanted to mess with you. That's why we approached Dr. Solow first. But she wouldn't cooperate. We needed you. Then it was decided that the best way to get both of you to cooperate would be to take Dr. Solow into our . . . temporary custody. The director gave us a field operative for that, and I was given permission to run my experiment before we contacted you."

"How many of you are there at the safe house?"

"Three. Two researchers and the field operative."

"Where are you keeping Dr. Solow?"

"In a bedroom on the second floor, at the rear. We have an operations center set up in the basement. Look, why don't you let me try to—?"

"Shut up," Veil said, then bent over the other man and searched through his pockets. He found a cellular phone, smashed it. Then he dragged the helpless man into a corner of the foyer before opening the doors of the freight elevator and stepping in. "Your paralysis will wear off in about forty-five minutes, Denny," he continued. "If I were you, I'd just stay put and wait it out. If it does occur to you to try to crawl out of here and look for help so that you can phone ahead, remember the neighborhood you're in. The vultures around here would like nothing better than to find a nice, well-dressed young fellow like you helpless on the sidewalk. How are you on double negatives?"

"What?"

"I will not not be left alone. And I will not allow anyone to bother Dr. Solow. Tell that to your superiors at Langley. The director of Ops will know just how serious I am."

"Yes, sir."

Veil returned to his arsenal on the third floor. He selected a .45 automatic, which he placed in a small duffel bag along with lock-picking tools and a length of light but strong nylon rope. Then he went out and took a cab to the CIA's safe house on the Upper West Side. He disarmed the security system from a circuit box on the side of the brownstone, then picked the lock on the back door and went in. He found the field operative, a bald, burly man dressed in matching green slacks, shirt, and sport jacket, in a room on the ground floor watching television and drinking beer. The man leaped to his feet and grabbed for the gun in his shoulder holster when Veil entered, and Veil whipped the barrel of his .45 against the side of the man's head, knocking him unconscious. Veil tied up the operative with the nylon cord, then left the room

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and bounded almost soundlessly up the stairs to the second floor. At the opposite end of a corridor an older man with a withered left arm, dressed in a brown tweed suit and smoking a pipe, was sitting in a chair outside a closed door. When the man looked up, he saw Veil stalking down the corridor toward him, gun raised and aimed at his head. The pipe dropped from the man's clenched teeth and the color drained from his face as he leaped to his feet and thrust his hands in the air.

"Open it," Veil said quietly, nodding toward the door.

"It's not locked," the man with the withered arm replied in a choked whisper.

Veil turned the knob and opened the door. Then he grabbed the front of the man's shirt and shoved him hard into the room. The man in tweed stumbled, spun around, landed on the bed, bounced, and fell on the floor on the other side. Dr. Sharon Solow, her long, wheat-colored hair tied back in a ponytail, was sitting under a bright light in an easy chair across the room. She looked up from the book she was reading, and her eyes, almost as blue as his own, went wide when she saw him. She dropped her book, leaped to her feet, and rushed into his arms.

Veil held the woman he loved tightly in his arms, caressing her hair, brushing his lips against her forehead and cheek.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes." Sharon kissed him hard on the mouth, then stepped back and frowned. "Veil, somehow they found out about the Lazarus Project. They came to me, wanted me to fill them in on the details. I told them I didn't know what they were talking about. There wasn't anything I could tell them that wouldn't involve you. I don't understand how—"

"They already knew about my involvement. They got hold of some old KGB files that presumably mention the two of us and what you were trying to do in that little mountaintop hospice at Pilgrim's Institute."

"Oh God. They must know just enough to get somebody killed."

"It appears that way. I wonder how many people the Russians killed trying to get somebody through the Lazarus Gate and back again."

"How did you find me?"

"They decided to use some Lazarus Person they'd found to run a little experiment on me before calling me to tell me they had you. The experiment didn't quite turn out the way they'd expected."

"Veil, we have to talk to them!"

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"Talk to them?" Veil paused, glanced at the man in the tweed suit, who had gotten to his knees and was peering at Veil over the top of the bed. "I've been giving some thought to killing everybody in this house."

"No, my love! You mustn't do that! They're just scientists, and they're terribly curious."

"These terribly curious scientists work for a particularly ugly little department in the CIA that was supposed to have been shut down last year."

"But these people mean no harm—except for the man in green."

"He's sleeping this one out."

"It's what they're trying to do that's so dangerous, my love. We have to talk to them, tell them what will happen if they try to repeat those experiments."

"I'll talk to them. You go home."

"No. I want to be with you."

Veil turned to the man in the tweed suit, who had finally risen to his feet and was holding tightly to his withered arm, as if it were a frail captive that might slip away. "It looks like you're finally going to find out what you want to know. Take us to your leader."

The man cleared his throat, drew himself up straighter. "I . . . uh, I'm the leader. I'm Dr. Schaefer. What have you done with Dr. Whalen?"

"He's taking some time out to rethink his approach to this whole matter, and maybe consider other career options. Who else is in the house, besides the Jolly Green Giant?"

"Just Dr. Leeds. She's downstairs."

"Is she armed?"

"Of course not. What do you think we—?"

"Let's go."

Veil and Sharon followed the man in the tweed suit down two flights of stairs to the basement, which was spacious and had been cleared to make room for a wooden table, a desk, chairs, two hospital gurneys, and an array of medical equipment that was now pushed back against the wall at the opposite end of the room. Half of the wall to their left was covered with a large mural comprised of dozens of separate, framed panels and illuminated by spotlights recessed in the ceiling. A big-boned, white-haired woman who was standing at the table and making notes on a pad looked up and started with alarm as they entered the room.

"Just stay calm, Gail," the man in the tweed suit said quickly,

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walking across the room and touching the woman's hand. "Dr. Solow and Mr. Kendry have agreed to cooperate with us."

"Veil," Sharon said in a voice just above a whisper as she turned to look at the multi-paneled mural. "That's—"

"It certainly is," Veil replied drily as he stepped closer to the wall to examine his work.

The predominant color of the painting was a brilliant, electric blue surrounded on all sides by clouds of gold-specked black and gray. Brush techniques and alternating patches of thin and thick layers of pigment projected the illusion of movement, of flight toward a gray figure with outstretched arms silhouetted against a pool of brilliant, pure white light. In the space where the figure's heart would be was an open rectangle where the brick wall behind the mural showed through. "I painted 'The Lazarus Gate' a long time ago," Veil continued quietly, turning back to the two scientists. "The Company must have gone to considerable trouble and expense to find and put all these panels together. My work doesn't come cheap."

It was the white-haired woman who answered. "It took years. The individual panels were in museums, galleries, and private collections all over the world. But we never could find the last panel. Would you tell us what's there?"

Veil's response was to point to the strips of paper that were EKG printouts taped to the wall next to the mural. Each clearly showed the signature Lazarus Spike of someone who had been clinically dead and then brought back to life after having seen the Lazarus Gate. "Have you tried to send anybody there yet?"

"No," the woman replied evenly. "We needed more information before we tried to conduct the experiment. That's why we were so anxious to speak to you and Dr. Solow. Is it true that humans who approach the Lazarus Gate as they are dying become telepathic?"

"Where did you get these EKG printouts?"

"From the hospital records of Lazarus People, men and women who had a near-death experience naturally."

"I assume you questioned all of them. What did they say when you asked them if they'd become telepathic when they were dying?"

The woman flushed slightly. "They just laughed. All of them."

"Well, there you are."

"But there is something there. You painted a picture of it."

"Of course there's something there. Death. That's why we say that people who've seen it and survived have had a near-death experience. It's not complicated, Doctor. For some people, all they

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have to do to get there is to die. Things are going to become complicated when you start sending living people off to find this place and they don't come back." Veil paused as Denny Whalen, looking thoroughly shaken, walked through the door. Then he turned to Sharon. "Now that everybody's here, tell them what they want to know."

Sharon nodded, said, "I'm a physician, as you know. What you may not know is that I'm a thanatologist—a specialist in death and the dying. For years it has been known that a small percentage of people who 'die,' as it were—that is, their hearts stop beating and they are clinically dead—revive and tell a story about being in a corridor and seeing at the end of it a blinding white light and a shadowy figure beckoning to them. At this moment they report feeling completely at peace, with no fear of death. Every single one of them reports desperately wanting to fly into the arms of this figure and be washed in the white light. Those who don't, who turn back at the last moment from the cusp of death and revive, uniformly do so because of some compelling personal reason, a sense of unfinished business which can be anything from a belief their family can't survive without them to an unpaid utility bill. The experience has been reported by people from all cultures in societies all over the world, by those who are religious and others who are atheists. The vision is seen by about two percent of the people who've had a near-death experience, and we refer to them as Lazarus People. All report feeling remarkably changed, and all had an identical reading on their EKGs a moment or two before they revived. That's what we call the Lazarus Spike, and we say that they've been to the Lazarus Gate."

The man with the withered arm pointed to Veil's mural. "That's what they see? That's the Lazarus Gate?"

"That's it," Veil replied curtly. "Go on, Sharon."

"Years ago I was in Monterey doing secret research—the Lazarus Project—for an ex-astronaut named Jonathan Pilgrim who'd had a near-death experience and believed he'd found heaven; he was looking for a way to control the experience. I worked in a hospice that was separate from Jonathan's main operation, where researchers studied individuals with highly developed talents or unusual traits. Veil had been invited to come there as a test subject, and he wound up with me at the hospice because—"

"That's irrelevant," Veil interrupted.

Denny Whalen shook his head impatiently, said, "But you said you'd tell us what we wanted to know!"

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"There's nothing of any value for you to learn from my experience. I ended up in Dr. Solow's hospice by accident because of some funny business with a KGB operative who was monitoring the whole situation at Pilgrim's Institute. My experience is irrelevant to your purposes because I wasn't dying when I wound up in the hospice, and I'm not a Lazarus Person."

The three researchers exchanged puzzled glances, then looked back at Veil. The white-haired woman said, "But there's your painting . . ."

"How do you know I didn't work from some Lazarus Person's description of the experience?"

"Did you?"

"No. Listen up, folks, because I'm only going to go over this once—and I'm not going to answer any personal questions. Denny here will tell you just how jealously I guard my privacy. The problem is that you've already shoved your noses so far into my private business that I have to give you this information to push you back out. By definition, a Lazarus Person is a child or adult who has suffered a very particular near-death experience. A consciousness of the world and a sense of self had been formed in the individual, and it is this perception of the world and self that is so profoundly changed when a person sees the Lazarus Gate and then returns to life. That isn't what happened to me. I almost died at birth, and a newborn infant has no sense of self or the world. I was born with a cawl, and my parents named me Veil as a kind of prayer. Obviously, I lived, but I suffered—suffer—brain damage. I was left a vivid dreamer, a condition that can best be described as a kind of rupturing of the protective membrane separating dreams from reality. I dream in technicolor and surround sound, and those dreams are every bit as coherent and vivid as what I experience when I'm awake. The condition can drive you insane, and not a few vivid dreamers die in their sleep of heart attacks; vivid dreamers not only get chased by ogres, sometimes they get eaten. Denny here may harbor suspicions that I'm a violent person. I became one because of my vivid dreaming, and I eventually learned to control both the violence and the dreams through painting. Now I can go virtually anywhere I like and do anything I want in my dreams—but I'm still just tucked in bed, dreaming. There's no astral projection, no telepathy, no precognition, and none of those other wet dreams the Russians were having. Just dreams, with absolutely no practical application—unless you want to count my work as an application. It's just imagination. That's

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how I discovered the Lazarus Gate, which seems to be a kind of shared racial consciousness some people experience as they die. It probably has to do with endorphins and hard-wiring those people have in their brains. The point is that I got there through the back door, in a manner of speaking. I was able to go to the Lazarus Gate and return, literally without losing any sleep over it, because I wasn't dead, just dreaming. I'd learned to control my vivid dreaming, so I just checked out the neighborhood, then turned around and went home. When I woke up, I started this mural. Anyone you try to send there by artificial means, with your machines and your drugs, isn't going to be so fortunate. You can manipulate their brain waves to match that pattern, all right, but anybody you kill and try to send there is going to stay dead. That's all the Lazarus Gate is—death. The drugs you need to use to artificially create that brain-wave pattern block the way back. Your test subjects aren't going to be sending messages from submarines, or anywhere else, to other test subjects because they'll very quickly become biologically as well as clinically dead. End of story."

Again, the researchers exchanged glances. It was Denny Whalen who finally spoke. "What's on the missing panel in the mural?"

"Jesus, Denny," Veil said, then sighed and shook his head. "What a great question; it shows how impressed you are by what I just told you. My work is totally irrelevant. We've told you everything you need to know. You can interview all the Lazarus People you want about those crackpot KGB theories, and they'll laugh at your questions like the others have done. You think they're all involved in some conspiracy? They've all survived a similar, profoundly moving experience that has left them with mixed emotions about returning to life, and they're looking forward to repeating the experience when the time comes. They're not about to be bothered trying to describe the experience or explain themselves to a bunch of science wonks working for the CIA."

Now there was a prolonged silence, which was finally broken by Sharon. "The Russians, of course, knew about Lazarus People, and they'd been conducting their own experiments, probably for years. Because of the well-known phenomenon of Lazarus People who are strangers instinctively recognizing what the other is, they theorized that some kind of crude telepathy was taking place, and that this telepathic power was greatest in the few moments before death—as certain people approach the Lazarus Gate. One of their

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many zany notions was to take two people in different parts of the world, stop their hearts, use drugs to get Lazarus Spikes on the subjects' EKGs, have them exchange secrets at the Lazarus Gate, then revive them and recover the information. *Voilà.* An intelligence-gathering system that is instantaneous, and can't be penetrated. This seems to be your Holy Grail as well. Forget it. As Mr. Kendry has explained, you can't duplicate the experience in a lab and have the test subject or subjects survive. The KGB probably tried to do it many times, and kept losing people. That's why they penetrated Jonathan Pilgrim's operation when they found out I was doing similar research. But I was working with people who were already dying and who fit a profile predicting they might be candidates for experiencing the Lazarus Gate. We never tried the experiment you're contemplating, because we'd already done computer simulations telling us it couldn't be done successfully."

"That doesn't jibe with what's in the KGB reports," the white-haired woman said, her tone openly sceptical. "Those records indicate *you* were sent there, and you've obviously survived."

Sharon shook her head impatiently. "Those files are inaccurate. It's true they wanted to use me as a guinea pig, and they got as far as stopping my heart. But then Veil stopped them before they could try to induce a Lazarus Spike, and he revived me."

"But you died and came back," the woman insisted. "You're a Lazarus Person."

"No. I just died and was revived before the KGB could juice me up. I never shared the experience. I don't remember a damn thing."

"Let's go," Veil said to Sharon, taking her arm and leading her across the basement. He paused at the door, turned back toward the others. "Now you know it all," he continued. "You're wasting your time. Don't waste mine, or Dr. Solow's, again. You tell your Company bosses I will not tolerate anyone from your outfit invading our privacy again. Got it?"

Denny Whalen half raised his hand, said in a small voice, "Uh, Mr. Kendry?"

"What part of that statement didn't you understand, Denny?"

"May I ask you just one more question?"

"Not about the missing panel."

"It's not about the mural, sir. It's about you."

Veil shrugged resignedly. "Let's hear the question."

"We learned about your being a CIA operative during the Vietnam War from the KGB files. There's no mention of you in our

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own files, not anywhere. The only thing we could find was a note on your army record that you'd been dishonorably discharged on a Section Eight; just about everything else had been deleted. The KGB reports say that your CIA code name was Archangel. Why did the Company expunge your file?"

Veil smiled thinly, exchanged glances with Sharon, then replied, "For your own good, Denny, I'm not going to tell you. Don't pursue it; don't even think about it. You ask that question of the wrong person at Langley, and you're going to end up dead. Good night."

Veil dreams.

He senses something is wrong, and he flies to where he has not been in many years, the Lazarus Gate. He is pure blue flight, surrounded by a brilliant electric blue. He is the blue, and when he looks at his hands he can see through them. There are no fixed reference points, no sounds, only the sensation that he is traveling at great speed through no time and no space to a place that for others is death.

As he continues to stare at his right hand a pinpoint of white light suddenly appears in the blue beyond the palm. He puts his hand to his eyes and the light flashes through him, arcing down his spinal cord. He explodes into pieces and is reassembled, floating weightless in a gray void before a shadowy figure silhouetted against a shimmering white radiance that he knows is the Lazarus Gate. The man in green, naked now like everyone who comes here, is just completing his passage through the gate, disappearing from sight as a great chime sounds, and Veil can feel the booming echo in his head, heart, stomach, and groin.

Denny Whalen, his eyes bulging with wonder and a huge grin on his face, is floating on his back, arms and legs spread out to his sides, down the gray corridor toward the beckoning figure. Veil speeds down the corridor, past the scientist, then stops in front of him, blocking the way.

Denny sees him and giggles hysterically, the sound of his laughter emerging from his mouth as a series of tiny bell sounds that cascade like rain all around them. "HEY, KENDRY! YOU DIDN'T TELL US WHAT IT FELT LIKE! WHAT A TRIP! ARE YOU REALLY HERE, OR IS THIS JUST A DREAM?!"

"Precisely," Veil replies evenly.

"WHICH IS IT?!"

"This is a dream you're not going to wake up from unless you do exactly as I say."

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"WHO WANTS TO WAKE UP?"

"You don't have to shout. As you can see, there's a great sound system here."

"I'M SO HAPPY!"

"Denny, you're really a glutton for punishment. You and your buddy who just went brain dead just couldn't resist the temptation to try for the Lazarus Gate, could you?"

"BUDGET CUTBACKS!" Denny shouts, and again giggles hysterically. "EVERYBODY HAS TO PULL THEIR WEIGHT OR GET FIRED! I FIGURED THIS WAS A WAY TO GET AHEAD! WE COULDN'T JUST TAKE YOUR WORD FOR IT THAT THERE WAS NOTHING HERE! THE STAKES WERE TOO HIGH!"

"Stop shouting, Denny. Calm down."

Denny, the fields of freckles on his face glowing purple, tries to somersault up and over Veil, but Veil blocks his way. "If you are really here, then it's true," Denny says, his voice dropping to a whisper. "We're communicating telepathically. You and Dr. Solow lied."

"So sue us."

"Absolute, stone telepathy, complete with bells and whistles, a great light show, and all in living color."

"*Almost* living, Denny. You seem to keep forgetting that little problem. What you are is not quite biologically dead, but you're working on it."

"This is what's on the missing panel in the mural, isn't it? You."

"No. There is no missing panel, Denny. The mural is complete as it is. There's nothing there at the heart of that figure. It's biological death. There is no emptier space."

"Who is he?"

"There's nobody there, Denny. It's a shadow. Superstition. Humans are apparently hard-wired for it. Superstition may have been a very useful survival skill for cave people in the Stone Age."

"How do you know there's nothing there?"

"Because I've been there, Denny. I've passed through the heart of that shadow many times."

"You brought Dr. Solow back from beyond there, didn't you?"

"Yes. But it took years, and a very special lifeline called love. Sharon is a unique survivor, because I'm apparently unique—no other vivid dreamer that I know of has learned to control dreaming as I do, or traveled here. In addition, to find others you need a

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personal connection. That's why you don't see anybody else around."

Denny giggles again, but his laughter is becoming less hysterical. "You raise the dead."

"I don't make a habit of it, and I'm certainly not available for work as a kind of astral answering machine for the CIA or anyone else. You didn't listen before when I warned you, Denny, but you'd better listen now. Apparently every person experiences some flow of endorphins just before the end; it's life's last gift to us. It's why you feel so good, and why Lazarus People no longer fear death. It also changes the way they view things. Even if you could send intelligence operatives here to exchange messages without killing them, not much of the information they gave back to you would be very useful. Lazarus People make lousy spies, because spying doesn't interest them any longer. Harming people doesn't interest them, nor does lying and secrecy—unless it's to protect life. But that issue's moot. What's happened, as I warned, is that the drug cocktail they gave you to induce the Lazarus Spike after they stopped your heart has resulted in a multifold increase in endorphins; right now your brain is flooded with feel-good juice. You don't want the feeling to end; you can't end it on your own, any more than you can suddenly stop an orgasm. Unless you do as I say, your brain will die before it can reabsorb the endorphins. Right now your people are no doubt frantically trying to restart your heart and wondering why they can't. It's because you don't want the orgasm to end. You could say I'm here to squeeze your dork until the effect begins to wear off."

"Wooaaaa."

"Sorry. I know it's a tacky analogy, but it's the most accurate I can think of."

"But you're absolutely right. I don't want to go back. There's nothing back there that interests me any longer."

"See the problem? Count sheep, Denny."

"What?"

"You heard me."

Denny giggles again. "That's very funny."

"Count sheep—big, fat, ugly sheep. You have to try to distract yourself from the ecstasy long enough for your brain and other organs to reabsorb the drugs. There can't be much time left, because we're drifting closer to the Lazarus Gate. I know we're close, because I can feel the pressure of the light on my back. I won't go through there with you, because you'll be beyond my

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help. Now close your eyes and count sheep. I'm going to come closer. If you can feel my presence entering yours, wrap your arms and legs around me and hold tight."

"I'm not sure we know each other that well."

"This is about life, Denny. Shared humanity. If you can become one with me, I may be able to take you back. Do it. Quickly."

Denny Whalen continues to grin inanely, but he closes his eyes, and his lips move as he begins to count. Veil moves even closer, entering the mist that is the other man's body. When he feels Denny's presence, he wills himself into flight back down the corridor, slowly at first and then accelerating. Denny, still counting, comes with him. When they reach the field of electric blue, Veil rolls away from the other man and returns to his own darkness.

Denny Whalen stood outside on the sidewalk beneath the streetlight where the first Lazarus Person had been, looking up at his window. Veil did not have to check the streets surrounding the building to know the man had come alone. He selected a bottle of wine, then took two glasses from a cabinet and went downstairs. "Welcome back," he said, walking over to the red-haired man and handing him a glass. "I'd invite you up, but I've been working, and I don't like people to see my works-in-progress."

Denny held out his glass as Veil poured wine for both of them. "It really happened, then, didn't it?" he asked quietly.

"I suppose that depends on one's definition of reality. Are you still interested in sending secret messages from submarines?"

"I came to thank you."

Veil shrugged. "No need. I'm glad you made it back."

"You brought me back. They were just about ready to give up trying to revive me. Another couple of seconds and I would have been dead."

"You were dead."

"I'd have been permanently dead."

"Indeed."

They sat down together on the curb, shoulder to shoulder, and sipped their wine in silence. Finally Denny said, "I lied to them. I told them I didn't remember everything. I told them it didn't work."

"That part isn't a lie. It doesn't work."

"God, dying is so *private.*"

"Indeed."

"I know so much about you now, Veil."

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"No, you don't, Denny. You just feel very close to me. There's a difference. This is what you'll feel with every other Lazarus Person you meet for the rest of your life."

"No. I *know* you. I know the goodness in you. And I know that somehow the Company hurt you terribly."

"They didn't hurt me at all. I owe everything I am and have to the Company."

"They hurt you."

"You're getting maudlin on me, Denny. Now drop it. That's as private to me as dying."

Denny sighed, nodded. "With the corpse of one field operative and a researcher who says he experienced nothing to explain, I don't think they'll be trying that experiment again."

"Let's hope not."

"I'm quitting the agency."

"Why?" Veil asked in a mild tone.

"I thought you'd understand."

"Tell me."

"You were right about how returning from the Lazarus Gate changes people. Now so much of what the Company does seems just . . . silly. I want to do something else with my life. I want to do what you do."

"Paint?"

"No. Something that's deeply satisfying to me personally. Maybe helping people."

"While you're trying to figure out what to do with the rest of your life, consider the possibility that you could help people by staying right where you are now. There are lots of bad guys in the world who need spying on, Denny. Leave them to their own devices, unchecked, and they'll eat innocent people alive."

"I assumed you hated the Company."

"I hate the bad guys in the Company—and there's a whole passel of them. They're the ones who tried to hurt me. I don't object to the CIA's mission—just the way they go about it. Now, I happen to think having a Lazarus Person in there is a hoot. I also think it's a great idea. You should work hard for promotion, maybe devote your life to becoming Director. A Lazarus Person would make the perfect mole, a kind of ultimate weapon against the bad guys."

"I won't be a weapon for anybody, Veil."

"Exactly my point, Denny." Veil smiled as he raised his glass. "Here's to a long and illustrious career in the CIA, Denny. Cheers."

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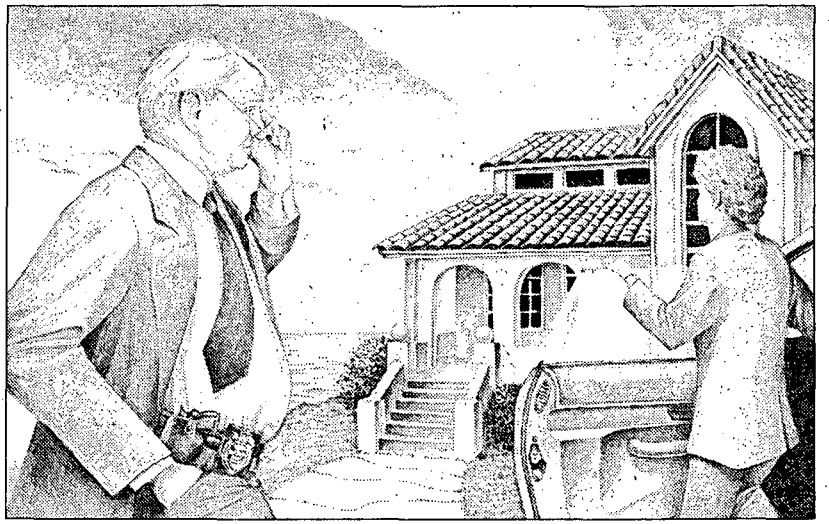

Art by Mike Aspengren

A New Life

by Edward D. Hoch

Casper Stone had come to appreciate every little break in the sodden routine of his life behind bars. A trip to the dentist could liven up an entire week, and even a trial on an unresolved charge of bail-jumping brought a break in the endless days. He didn't even mind that they handcuffed his wrists and chained his ankles, so long as they took him away from the clamor and clash of the cellblock.

The trial, in the old courthouse on Seward Street, attracted a fair amount of media attention. Casper Stone had been convicted of man-slaughter just five months earlier, and there was a general belief that the relatively light sentence he received—four to eight years—had caused the District Attorney to press the bail-jumping charge. There were two holding cells in the old courthouse where the trial was being held. They were really cages of heavy wire mesh, not designed to hold prisoners for more than a few hours at

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a time. There was a sink but no toilet, and a single low stool for sitting. When Casper Stone was placed in the cell, it was nine-thirty in the morning; the trial was scheduled for ten.

The first thing Stone noticed about the holding cell was the wire mesh screen that covered a small square hole beneath the sink. It was on an inside wall and apparently provided access to the plumbing fixtures. He gave it a kick and was startled when it moved. The screws fastening it to the wall had not been tightened. What a joke it would be if he could squeeze through that opening somehow and escape!

A decade ago, the best of the Leopold stories appeared in a volume published by Southern Illinois University Press entitled *Leopold's Way.* Since author Edward D. Hoch has allowed his character to age, the Leopold we see today is different in many respects from the police captain of those early stories. One thing about Leopold hasn't changed though, and that's his ability to crack a case. ¶

The guards had left him alone in the cell. His lawyer would be arriving soon, but right now he had a few minutes alone. He dropped to his knees and tugged at the screen. It came off at once, as if the screws were too small for their holes. Sticking his head into the opening, Stone could see that it ran to a similar screen some three feet away, apparently giving access to another room. Suddenly he heard the sound of a door being unlocked and quickly pulled his head from the opening, replacing the screen.

His lawyer, a handsome young man named Thomas Griswald, appeared in the doorway with a uniformed guard. He carried a dark blue suit, complete with shirt and tie, on a hanger. "How you feeling, Casper?"

Stone shrugged. "It breaks the monotony. What do you think my chances are?"

The sandy-haired lawyer didn't answer directly. "This is the suit I bought you for the first trial. Put it on with the shirt and tie, and comb your hair. We want to get you looking good for that jury. I'll be back in ten minutes." The guard unlocked the heavy mesh door and Casper Stone accepted the suit with a nod of thanks.

When they were gone, he changed quickly into the shirt and

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suit, carefully knotting the tie and brushing his hair. Then he laid the prison uniform neatly on the low stool and dropped to the floor. With the screen off he had no trouble fitting through the access hole beneath the sink. Then he stretched out full length until he could touch the wire screen at the other end of the short tunnel. As he suspected, it too was loose. He pushed himself forward into the darkness.

The other room proved to be a closet containing mops, brooms, and buckets. The unlocked door led to a corridor in the courthouse. He turned on the closet light just long enough to check his appearance, brushing some dust from the blue suit. Then he opened the door a crack, saw that the coast was clear, and stepped out into the hallway. In two minutes he was mingling with a stream of people entering and leaving the building. In five minutes he was hurrying along the street a block away, a free man.

This time there'd be no mistake. He'd been given a new life and this time he'd get it right.

It felt good to be "Captain" Leopold again, even if he had been called out of retirement only to fill in while Fletcher recovered from a gunshot wound. That first morning in the office, it seemed as if he'd never been gone. There were one or two new faces, of course, but Lieutenant Connie Trent quickly introduced him to those he didn't know. He'd been especially reluctant to use Fletcher's glass-enclosed cubicle, which once had been his own. Connie understood that and suggested he take one of the empty desks in the squad room. It had been twenty-two years since she joined the department as a rookie cop, and she'd worked with him during most of that time. She was a lieutenant now, and still on her way up. Leopold and Fletcher and Connie Trent had been a team, and a damn good one.

On the third morning of his return, while he was still familiarizing himself with the current caseload, Connie took a call from the courthouse. "They've had an escape from the holding cell. They're notifying us because the escapee is a convicted killer."

Leopold looked up. "Anyone I know?"

"Casper Stone. It was after you retired but maybe you remember it."

"Refresh my memory, Connie." The name was familiar but he couldn't quite place it.

"He was a small businessman with an auto repair service who

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claimed he'd been swindled by a financial consultant named Rich Easton—"

"Of course!" Leopold's wife Molly had been involved in the case briefly, until she passed it on to a young lawyer in her office. It had upset her so much he was surprised he hadn't remembered.

"—and one day about a year ago he bought a gun and went up to Easton's office."

"It was your case, wasn't it, Connie?"

She nodded, smiling grimly. In her early forties, Connie Trent was still an attractive woman. Leopold knew she'd had relationships with men over the years, but she'd never married. Fletcher had a wife and family, and Leopold had married for the second time six years before his retirement. With Connie it was different. She was, as they say, married to her job. "It was my case," she agreed. "Stone showed up at Rich Easton's office and pulled his gun, demanding to see Easton. A secretary phoned 911 while an employee named Earl Frank tried to disarm him. They struggled over the gun and Stone killed him. He was overpowered by two patrolmen who arrived just seconds after the shooting."

Leopold nodded. "That was when Molly came on board as his attorney. He argued that he hadn't meant to kill Frank, that the shooting had been accidental. She asked for bail, pleading that he had roots and a business in the community, and the judge granted it. That was when he skipped town. Molly was pretty upset about it. After they recaptured him she resigned from the case and turned it over to Tom Griswald in her office."

"The jury and judge both gave him a break at the trial last winter. He was only convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to four to eight years in prison. That's when the D.A. decided to press the bail-jumping charge and get him some extra time behind bars. He was at the courthouse for the beginning of the trial when he escaped from the holding cell."

"Get on the phone to Easton and warn him that Stone's on the loose. I'll swing by his office and then go on to the courthouse."

Connie frowned, her hand on the phone. "Do you really think he escaped so he could have another try at Easton? When he jumped bail he just headed out of town."

"We'd better not take chances," Leopold said.

Rich Easton had a reputation around the city as something of a ladies' man. Into his forties, with jet black hair and perfect teeth, he'd built a business as a financial advisor and money manager.

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Casper Stone was not the first person to feel cheated by his advice, and he probably wouldn't be the last; but while dissatisfied clients filed lawsuits, Easton was most likely at his club with a gorgeous woman on his arm. Some said he'd settled down following his marriage to Belinda Haskins, a local socialite, but others felt she was merely the latest in his series of women betrayed. Rumors of secret bank accounts in other cities persisted, and there were charges that money from people like Stone, meant for sketchily described mutual funds, had ended up in these accounts.

Easton rose from behind his desk as Leopold was ushered into the office. "Good morning, Captain. Lieutenant Trent phoned to say you'd be stopping by. What in God's name happened at the courthouse? How could they let that man escape?"

"We're looking into it," Leopold assured him. "Lieutenant Trent handled the previous case and she filled me in on the circumstances. If you intend to spend the day here at the office I can have a uniformed patrolman on duty outside."

"You think he's coming here?"

"I have no idea. Obviously it would be better if you laid low for a few days. It may not even take that long. We hope to have him back in custody by this afternoon."

Rich Easton seemed to ponder Leopold's advice. "You may be right. I'll phone my wife." He dialed a number while Leopold glanced around the office. After a moment he spoke into the phone. "Honey, there's a little problem. Nothing serious, but I think I'll drive down to the beach house for the rest of the day. Want to meet me there? Fine—about an hour."

Leopold waited till he'd hung up and then asked, "Is the beach house a safe place?"

"Well, it's safe mainly because it's on the Sound and I don't think he'd look for me there."

"Does Stone know about it?"

Easton thought about that. "Yes, he was there once. Belinda and I had a clambake two years ago for some of my clients. I remember Stone's being there because he tripped and fell off the dock. I had to give him some of my clothes to wear the rest of the day while his dried."

"Was he angry about that?"

"No, no. We were good friends until his investments started going bad. Then he accused me of mismanaging his account. The final straw was a large investment I'd made for him in an upstate winery. The business collapsed utterly and he lost over a hundred

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thousand. I tried to tell him that these things happened occasionally, that it was no one's fault. That's when he came after me with the gun and killed poor Earl."

There was something a bit too slick about Rich Easton, and Leopold could understand why an unlucky investor might boil over with rage at him, especially on being told that "these things happened." It didn't excuse the killing of Earl Frank, but the jury must have felt it made Casper Stone's actions understandable. The question was whether that same rage existed today.

"If he knows about the beach house it may not be the best place to go," Leopold cautioned.

"I have a licensed revolver. If he shows up I'll be ready for him."

"All right," Leopold said with some reluctance. "Give me the address and I'll have a patrol car keep an eye on it."

He left Easton's office and went back to his car. On a hunch he decided to drive by the consultant's city home. It was on the north side, in one of the more fashionable areas, and he was pleased to see a police car parked just down the street, obviously on the lookout for Casper Stone. A well-dressed, middle-aged woman was unloading groceries from a minivan in the driveway and he pulled in behind her. She glanced up from her task, startled, and watched as he approached.

"I'm Captain Leopold," he said, showing his badge and identification. "Are you—?"

"Belinda Easton. My husband phoned me about the escape, just after I'd heard it on the news. Is there any sign of Stone yet?" She was a handsome woman who'd made no attempt to hide the few extra pounds and gray hairs that middle age brought.

"Not yet, but we'll get him. I just wanted to make sure you're all right. Do you think the beach house will be safe?"

"Beach house?" She looked at him blankly. "I rarely go there. The summer sun is bad for my skin."

"I must have misunderstood your husband. I thought he said he'd be going to his beach house."

She picked up the last bag of groceries from the backseat of the minivan. "Rich often takes a ride down there by himself, just to check the place out. I was up for the weekend earlier this month."

"We'll keep a patrol car here all night, unless Stone's apprehended in the meantime. If you hear any odd sounds, dial 911."

"Thank you, Captain."

He left her and got back into his unmarked car, wondering who was meeting Rich Easton at his beach house.

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Molly was already home when Leopold pulled in the driveway later that afternoon. There was a car he didn't recognize parked on the street and he prepared himself for the unknown visitor. It was Tom Griswald, Molly's young associate and Casper Stone's attorney of record. Griswald was not yet thirty, only a few years out of law school, but he'd done well on a couple of high-profile cases. One of his triumphs, of course, had been getting Stone off with a manslaughter conviction and a four-to-eight-year sentence.

"I'm glad you're home," Molly said, greeting him with a light kiss on the cheek, apparently for Griswald's benefit. "Tom and I were just talking over Casper Stone's escape."

Leopold shook hands with the young attorney. "Did you see your client this morning?"

Tom Griswald nodded. "I brought him a suit of clothes to wear in court. When I came back to discuss the case he was gone." His rumpled blond hair and a deep cleft in his chin made him seem attractively boyish. Leopold decided it probably didn't hurt him these days when juries often had a majority of women serving.

"Apparently he escaped through a maintenance tunnel that led to a storage closet," Leopold said. "Once he was there, wearing a suit and tie like everyone else, it was easy for him to mingle with the crowd and leave the building." He smiled and added, "Anyone who noticed him probably took him for a lawyer."

Griswald flushed a bit and Molly hastened to assure him it was just Leopold's idea of a joke. "Why don't you stay for dinner?"

"Sorry, I can't. Big date tonight. Thanks for the offer, though." He stood up. "Good seeing you again, Captain. I shouldn't say this, but I hope you get my client back behind bars in a hurry."

"I hope so too."

When they were alone Molly said, "He's got a great future with the firm, but he's still young. He came here to ask me what he should do about Stone. He remembered that I dropped him as a client after he jumped bail and wondered if he should do the same."

"What did you tell him?"

"That it was his decision. The man is certainly going to need a lawyer when he's back behind bars."

"You knew Stone. You talked to him immediately after the shooting in Easton's office. How did he seem to you? Is this thing an obsession with him, Molly?"

"You mean, is he likely to have another try at Rich Easton? I'd

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say yes." She studied him, then asked, "You really like being back on the job, don't you? Even though it's just till Fletcher recovers?"

"I love it, Molly. It's like a new life and I guess that's what everyone wants at some time or another."

Later that night, when they'd been in bed about an hour, the phone rang. It was Connie, talking fast. "There's a fire at Easton's beach house. A neighbor phoned it in. I'm on my way there now."

"And I'm right behind you."

He could see the blaze lighting the night sky as soon as he turned onto Shoreline Drive. Fire engines from the city and suburbs were on the scene, and though it was well after midnight dozens of neighbors had come out in their nightclothes to watch the flames as they sputtered and died. He spotted Connie Trent at once, arguing with a white-coated fire marshal who was trying to hold her back from the smoking water-soaked embers.

"What is it, Connie?"

"The firemen saw two bodies. I'm trying to get in for a look."

The fire marshal shook his head. "You can't help them now."

"Where are the bodies?" Leopold asked.

"Looks like they were in bed, probably a man and woman but we can't even be sure of that."

"Smoking?"

"Not the way that bedroom went up. I've got someone from the arson squad on the way." The fire marshal turned away, shouting orders to redirect a hose.

Connie looked drained of emotion. "Do you think Casper Stone did this, Captain?"

"We don't even know what was done yet. Do you have men searching the area?"

She nodded. "But they won't find much in the dark. We'll have to come back in the morning. Do you think it might be Easton and his wife?"

"Not his wife. You'd better go break the news to her. Tell her neither body has been identified."

Leopold returned home for a few hours' sleep but was up before dawn. Molly rolled over in the big bed and asked, "Are you going back out there?"

"I have to. Maybe you should phone Tom Griswald and tell him what's happened."

By daylight the beach house was a scorched and dripping mess. The police photographer had done what he could and two body

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bags were being carried out as Leopold drove up. Connie was already on the scene with a couple of other detectives, sifting through the wreckage. "You must have gotten less sleep than I did," he said by way of greeting.

She was in the garage, studying a small motorboat resting on sawhorses. "Looks like he was burning off the paint with this propane torch."

"Could that have started the fire?"

"Lenny from the arson squad says it was gasoline poured on the bed. Since they didn't jump up or try to run, we think they were dead already."

Leopold got his first look at her tired eyes. "You've been here all night, haven't you?"

"Captain, when you were my age you'd have done the same thing. Besides, I wasn't exactly here the entire time. I drove in to Easton's house."

"My God!" He'd forgotten about the wife. "How's she taking it?"

"Bad. She called a neighbor to be with her."

"What about the second body?"

Connie made a face. "Mrs. Easton mentioned a name. Monica Raines. Until recently she was a paralegal who worked on Casper Stone's first trial. She took a statement from Easton and that's how they met."

"Who was she working for? The defense?"

Connie nodded. "Molly must know her."

Leopold didn't like any of it. "Did Belinda say her husband and this woman were having an affair?"

"She didn't say. When I told her there were two bodies she just mentioned the name. She was pretty broken up. It was hard to get anything out of her. We checked the address of a Monica Raines in the phone book but no one was home."

"I'd better phone Molly. Let me have that address." He went out to the car and used the cell phone. He caught her at the house just as she was leaving.

"What is it?" she asked, catching the gravity in his voice.

"We've got two unidentified bodies out here at the beach house. Mrs. Easton mentioned the name Monica Raines."

He heard Molly's sharp intake of breath. "It couldn't be Monica."

"She was a paralegal at your office?"

"If it's the same Monica Raines, she quit a few months back. After the Casper Stone verdict came in."

"She worked on that case?"

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"Yes. First for me, then for Tom. I don't know what she's doing now. There was a rumor she might be over at Salomon's office."

"Was there ever any talk about her and Rich Easton?"

"Not that I heard. She may have taken a preliminary statement from him."

He read her the address Connie had given him, and after checking her book she confirmed that was correct.

"All right," he said. "I'll call you as soon as we have anything."

Leopold waited through the day for the medical examiner's report, spending part of the time reviewing Stone's prison records. Connie reported there was no trace of Monica Raines and friends confirmed that she'd been friendly with Easton. When the M.E. called to say that identification would be impossible without dental records, Connie contacted Easton's dentist and an hour later managed to locate the Raines woman's dentist as well. "It was tough," she told Leopold. "The girl's family is down South somewhere. We still haven't reached them."

It was one of those cases where each passing hour made the ultimate identification more likely. By early afternoon neither Easton nor the Raines woman had surfaced, and Connie was designating them as the likely victims. "What do you think, Captain? Did Casper Stone find them there, kill them both, and set fire to the house?"

"That's certainly the most likely scenario, but let's wait for the official identification."

Finally, at twenty minutes to four, the medical examiner called, suggesting Leopold come down to the autopsy room. Connie went along, though she hated the sights and smells of the place. Dr. Potter was new since Leopold's time, but Fletcher spoke highly of the man. In court he was clear and concise, always an excellent witness for the prosecution.

"I've heard nothing but good things about you, Captain," Potter said, taking Leopold's hand. "Glad to have you back with us until Captain Fletcher is healed."

"What have you got, Doctor?"

Potter gestured toward the adjoining autopsy tables where plastic sheets covered the bodies. "A male and a female, both badly burned, with some indication of trauma to the faces as well. The man's jaw was broken. There was virtually no skin remaining on the faces or hands, so identification had to be made through dental records. In the case of the male it was quite easy. This was Mr.

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Easton's beach house, after all, and his records show a full set of false teeth, both upper and lower plates." He picked up a clear plastic evidence bag and showed them to Leopold and Molly—the perfect set of teeth reminded Leopold of Rich Easton's perfect smile. "You'll notice the dentist's mark is visible on each plate."

"What about the woman?" Leopold asked, secretly wondering if Easton's hair had been as phony as his teeth.

"Just two fillings and no false teeth or crowns. Not much to go on, but they do match the dental chart of Monica Raines. Since the body is the right size I think we can safely say it's hers."

"What if the dental records hadn't been available?" Connie Trent wanted to know.

"These days science has come up with a variety of identification techniques. For example, female pelvic bones often bear parturition scars, a notch for each child born. I can tell you that this victim has borne one child. Does that fit with Monica Raines?"

"I have no idea," Leopold said, "but we'll check it out."

It was Connie who asked the crucial question. "What was it that killed them, the fire or the blows to the head?"

"Actually they were both shot. They were already dead before the trauma or the fire."

Leopold nodded. "Thanks for the information. Send us the usual copies of your report."

As they turned away the doctor asked, "Captain Leopold, don't you want to look at the bodies?"

"I've already seen the pictures. That's enough."

Molly phoned him a short time later. "Have you identified the bodies yet?"

"We have their dental records. It's Rich Easton and Monica Raines, as we thought."

"I can't believe it about Monica. She was a brilliant paralegal with a sharp mind. I urged her once to consider law school."

"Why did she leave the firm?"

"I don't know. She just said she wanted a change. I think the Stone case took a lot out of everyone."

"But she continued working on it after you resigned from it."

"Tom needed her experience when he took over for me."

"One more thing. Did she ever have a child?"

"I think she did. She mentioned that she'd dropped out of college because she was pregnant. Perhaps she put it up for adoption."

"All right. I'll be home as soon as I can."

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He hung up and made a note on his pad, then went over to Connie Trent's desk. "It's time I spoke with Belinda Easton. Maybe you should come along."

They drove out to the Easton home, through a warm afternoon that bathed the streets in mellow sunshine. It was not a day to talk of death, but as they pulled up behind a string of cars in front of the Easton house it was obvious that friends and relatives had come to do just that.

Someone opened the door for Connie and Leopold, thinking they were family. Belinda Easton paled at the sight of them. "Does this mean you've identified the body?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Easton. It is your husband."

She sagged at the words, though she must have expected them. A tall man with an angular face moved quickly to get a grip on her. "Sit down, Belinda. Here!"

When she was seated on a straight-backed chair he said, "I'm her brother, Albert Haskins. This has been a terrible blow to the entire family."

Leopold glanced into the living room where a half-dozen others were watching in silence. "Is there a place where we can speak to your sister in private?"

"Through here." He led the way into a study that Easton had apparently used as an office. "All these people—I just got here myself and found the house full."

Belinda Easton seated herself facing them. "Those are my neighbors. They came as soon as they heard the news of the fire." Then, "Tell me how he died. Did he suffer?"

Leopold cleared his throat. "Both victims were shot to death. Your husband was also hit across the face with enough force to break his jaw and do other damage. Then the bodies were doused with gasoline from a can in the garage and set on fire."

"My God!" She buried her face in her hands. "I don't want to see him like that!"

"You won't have to. A visual identification would not be possible. But we do have to find this man Casper Stone who escaped from custody. Right now he's our most likely suspect."

"He said Rich cheated him. I knew he was trouble from the beginning. I even warned Rich about him."

"Has there been any recent communication from him?"

"No." Then the full import of Leopold's earlier words seemed to penetrate. "You said both victims. She was with him, then?"

"Belinda—" Her brother tried to interrupt but she persisted.

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"Was it Monica Raines?"

"We believe so, yes. Did you know her?"

"I met her before Stone's trial. How any law firm could defend such a man is more than I can understand."

"It's our legal system, Mrs. Easton. Pardon me for asking this, but was your husband romantically involved with Monica Raines?"

"I knew they were seeing each other. I asked him about it and he said she was giving him advice on some of his legal problems with these investors."

"She wasn't a lawyer. Such advice would have been foolish and possibly illegal."

Belinda Easton smiled sadly. "I imagined their meetings had other motives."

"You suspected she was with him last night."

"Yes. She went with him to the beach house frequently."

"And Casper Stone? Did you see him or anyone lurking around this house last night?"

"No. I retired early. I was asleep when Lieutenant Trent here woke me with news of the fire." A woman poked her head in then to say she had to leave, and Belinda hurried out to speak with her.

Leopold turned his attention to her brother. "She seems to have recovered from the shock of her husband's death."

Albert Haskins agreed. "They'd had their troubles in recent years, as you might have gathered. Rich was in way over his head as a financial adviser. It's a wonder Stone was the only one who came after him with a gun. And from what I hear, instead of trying to set things right, he was busy romping around with that Raines girl."

"Why didn't your sister leave him?" Connie Trent asked.

"I suggested it more than once, but she always hoped he'd straighten out."

Belinda returned then, long enough to say she really couldn't tell them any more just now. "Perhaps tomorrow things will be less hectic and I'll have my wits about me."

Her brother grunted. "And maybe by then you'll have caught that bastard."

There was a radio call for Leopold when they returned to the car. Tom Griswald had phoned in to report that the fugitive Casper Stone had contacted him about surrendering.

They drove directly to Griswald's office, on the same floor and just down the hall from Molly's office with the firm. She was there

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with him when Connie and Leopold were ushered in, studying the fax message on his desk without touching it, as if somehow the fugitive's fingerprints might have been transmitted through the telephone line with his words.

"It came in just over an hour ago," Molly told him. "Tom asked me what to do and I said you had to be notified at once."

The message had been sent from a fax machine at Copies & More, a commercial copy center a few blocks away that offered mailing and fax services as well. "Did he know your fax number?" Leopold asked Griswald.

"It's on my letterhead."

"I'll get on the phone to this place," Connie said. "They should remember the guy from an hour ago."

The brief message had been hand-printed on one of the Copies & More forms. It read: *Mr. Griswald. I'm in terrible trouble. I need your help. Meet me at the bus station at ten tonight. Don't bring the cops. I'll talk to them later. Casper.*

"Why didn't he just phone me?" Tom Griswald wondered.

"Because a call can be traced," Molly suggested.

"This can be traced too. It came from Copies & More!"

Connie Trent got off the phone and answered Griswald's objection. "He paid for the fax but told them to wait fifteen minutes before they sent it. Then he left."

"What's the description?" Leopold asked.

"Medium height and weight, still wearing the suit and white shirt but without the tie. He had on a baseball cap with a Yankees logo, pulled down over his eyes. He barely opened his mouth, only mumbled a few words."

"Dark hair?" Leopold asked.

"As much as the clerk could see, under the cap. She said the suit looked dirty, stained. She thought he'd been in a fight."

"It's got to be Stone," Griswald said.

Connie agreed. "We'll have that bus station surrounded."

"Wait a minute! I'm still his attorney. He contacted me. I assume he wishes to surrender, but I have to talk to him first."

"He's right," Molly said. "Tom has to speak with his client first. Naturally we hope he'll surrender, but that decision is his."

Leopold didn't like it. There seemed too many ways that Casper Stone might slip through their fingers. "All right," he said after a moment's thought, "but we'll be waiting a block away."

Later, when Leopold was alone with Connie Trent in the car, she opened up. "Captain, excuse me, but you can't do this! I know

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it's Molly's law firm but you can't risk letting a double murderer—a three-time murderer really—slip through our fingers if he decides he doesn't feel like surrendering!"

"The fax he sent says nothing about killing Easton or the woman, Connie."

"It wouldn't, would it?"

Leopold sighed. "All right, here's what we're going to do. Check the bus schedules and find the first bus leaving after ten o'clock. You can have a couple of cars ready to stop it a few blocks from the station. If he won't surrender and hops a bus, we'll take him."

"On a bus crowded with innocent people?"

"We don't know that he's armed."

Connie shook her head. "No, Captain! I won't buy that! You told me Easton had a licensed revolver at the beach house and we haven't found it. The logical assumption is that Stone used it to kill them and still has it with him. He's got nothing to lose by keeping the murder weapon, since he's already been convicted of one murder."

"Manslaughter, Connie," Leopold corrected.

"Captain, if we let him get on a bus carrying a revolver there'll be hell to pay!"

He knew she was right. "All right. Surround the station. Put someone inside undercover. Just keep your men out of sight till he talks to his lawyer."

Shortly before nine-thirty that night Leopold sat in the front seat of his car with Tom Griswald. They were parked a block from the bus station with a good view of its comings and goings. "What time should I go in?" the young lawyer asked nervously.

"About a quarter to ten," Leopold decided, "unless we spot him going in earlier."

"Mind if I smoke?" Griswald took out a pack of cigarettes.

"Go ahead."

"I'm not used to meeting murderers in bus stations."

"It hits you a bit personally when you know the victims."

He nodded. "Especially Monica. She worked with me on Stone's first trial."

"Molly said she'd left the firm. What happened there?"

"Just a better offer from Salomon. People change jobs all the time."

Leopold watched a stout black woman approach the bright facade of the bus station and disappear inside. "Did she get along well with Casper Stone?"

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"I guess she did. I never thought much about it. She probably only met him two or three times." He smirked a bit. "It's obvious now that she got on better with Rich Easton. Why do you ask?"

"Well, did Stone kill her for a reason or just because she was there?"

"I understand Monica and Easton were in bed together. If the room was dark he probably didn't even recognize her."

"That's true."

At twenty minutes to ten Leopold said, "Maybe you should start in now. Study the schedule or something. Act like you're waiting for a bus."

"What if he pulls a gun?"

"He won't do that. You're his lawyer."

Tom Griswald opened the car door and exited with some reluctance. "I'll try getting him to surrender. For God's sake don't do anything rash that'll get me killed!"

Leopold smiled, trying to lighten the mood. "Molly would never forgive me."

He watched Griswald walk quickly across the street and enter the bus station. The front windows were all glass and it was possible to see virtually everyone in the terminal. Right now there was only a slender gray-haired man at the ticket window. Two white women sat together against the back wall and the black woman sat alone near the front window. Leopold knew the next bus arrived at 9:55. Casper Stone had chosen the meeting time with care, when the station would be crowded with arriving passengers. Though the night had turned cool, Leopold opened the car windows to clear out the smoke from Griswald's cigarette. He glanced down the side street for Connie and the others, but they were well out of sight. Finally he called her on the radio. "Connie, Griswald has gone into the bus station. No sign of our man yet."

"We'll be ready," she responded.

The bus came almost on schedule, and for a few moments the station and the platform around the side were alive with people. He lost sight of the young lawyer, then spotted him again moving toward the men's room. Something was wrong. He wouldn't go in there at this crucial time, not unless he'd spotted Casper Stone.

"I'm going in, Connie," he said over the radio.

"I've got Sergeant Marlowe in there already, Captain!"

"But Sergeant Marlowe's a woman and Griswald just went into the men's room."

Connie was sprinting from her car by the time Leopold reached

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the bus station. The crowd had thinned out already but Griswald hadn't emerged from the men's room. Sergeant Marlowe, the black woman who'd been seated alone, was on her feet. "He went in there."

"I know," Leopold said. Connie was behind him with two detectives. Leopold pushed open the men's room door and entered, one hand on his pistol.

Tom Griswald was standing in the doorway of one of the toilet stalls, holding a blue suit coat and pants. "He was here, Captain! He was here and now he's gone."

"Did you speak with him?"

He shook his head. "I saw this man at the ticket window wearing a blue suit but I couldn't see his face and didn't recognize him. He went into the men's room just before the bus pulled in. There were lots of people coming and going but I didn't see him come out. I went in after him and finally when the place cleared out I checked the stalls and found these."

"Is this the suit you bought him for the trial?"

"That's it. The store label's still in it. He wore it at the first trial too."

Leopold turned the material inside out, pausing to examine what looked like dried blood.

Connie Trent stood at the open door. "Was he here?"

"Here and gone, Connie." He glanced around at the station, nearly empty now. The two women were still there chatting, along with a gray-haired toothless man who stood by the door waiting to be picked up. "Let's talk to that ticket clerk."

The clerk was a woman behind thick glass who spoke through a crackling microphone. She studied the mug shot of Casper Stone that Leopold held up. "I don't remember him."

"We think he was at this window ten minutes ago."

"Maybe. I never look at their faces, just their hands and the money through the slot."

"Where'd he buy a ticket for?"

"Hartford, maybe. Only tickets I sold tonight were for Hartford. Bus just pulled out."

"Is that the first stop?"

"Sure. It makes a stop out at the shopping mall to pick up more passengers but then it goes right to Hartford."

Connie hesitated, looking to Leopold for a decision. "We could have it held at the mall, Captain."

"No, he's not on board. That would be too risky."

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"But he changed out of the blue suit. There must have been a reason for that."

"A reason, yes." And suddenly Leopold knew what it was. "What fools we've all been!" He turned back toward the waiting room and saw the gray-haired man just going out the door. "Stop him!" he shouted to the detectives.

The man was out the door, breaking into a run, when Sergeant Marlowe hit him from behind, knocking him sprawling to the sidewalk. Then Connie Trent was on him with pistol drawn. They wrestled him into submission and Connie cuffed his hands behind his back. She looked up at Leopold with some surprise and said, "Captain, this isn't Casper Stone!"

"No, it's Rich Easton, back from the dead and ready to start a new life. He just looks different without his teeth."

All Easton would say on the way downtown was, "I want a lawyer."

Connie Trent had much more to say, and ask, once they were back in the squad room. "If that's Rich Easton, whose body was in the beach house?"

"Our escaped murderer, Casper Stone. Let's get Easton into the interrogation room as soon as his lawyer shows up and I'll go over the whole thing."

The lawyer was a man named Rankovich who was working on Easton's financial problems. He was obviously uncomfortable with the turn his client's fortunes had taken. "I don't believe he should make a statement tonight," he told Leopold.

"Fine. I just want him to listen to what we have against him so far."

When they were settled around the interrogation table, Leopold began talking. "Casper Stone escaped from the courthouse holding cell yesterday morning. He tracked you to your beach house, Mr. Easton, and went there last night to kill you. We don't know exactly what happened then, but somehow you killed Stone with your gun. The whole plot must have come to you in that instant. You were in great financial difficulties with your business, facing several lawsuits over your handling of clients' money. Staring down at the body, you must have realized that you and Casper Stone were the same size. I never knew him in life, but you told me yourself that you loaned him your clothes after he fell off your dock during a clambake. So you had to be around the same size."

"What about the other victim, Monica Raines?" Connie asked.

"After he got the idea of substituting Stone's body for his own,

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he had two reasons for killing Monica—to keep her quiet about the substitution and to heighten the illusion that the body was his. He arranged them in bed together as if they'd been sleeping or making love—"

"No!" Rich Easton shouted, suddenly on his feet. The lawyer tried to quiet him, but he brushed him away. "Stone killed her, not me! I was out in the garage last night, working on my boat, when he got into the house. They must have struggled over my gun and he killed her just like he killed Earl Frank in my office last year. I heard the shot and found him standing over the body. I hit him with the propane torch I was carrying and then picked up the gun and shot him. He wasn't getting away with another murder. That's when I got the idea about switching identities."

His lawyer struggled to be heard. "Rich, you really shouldn't—"

"I don't want them thinking I killed Monica. I loved her."

"I suppose the propane torch you were using to remove the boat's paint gave you part of the idea," Leopold continued. "You changed clothes with Stone, taking the suit his lawyer had provided, and placed both bodies on the bed. You noticed that Casper Stone was missing most of his teeth. Prison records show he'd had recent dental work. That gave you the rest of the idea. You pulled out his remaining teeth. Then you burned the face and hands with the torch, making visual and fingerprint identification next to impossible. You removed your complete set of false teeth, with your dentist's mark on both plates, and put them into the dead man's mouth. They didn't fit perfectly, of course, so you broke his jaw to cover the poor fit, and jammed them in. That was your big mistake, and when it finally dawned on me at the bus station tonight I knew the truth."

"What mistake?" Easton asked.

"The jaw was broken, the face was burned beyond recognition, yet this upper and lower plate were in perfect condition. They couldn't have been in the dead man's mouth when his jaw was broken and he suffered the worst of the burns. If the teeth, the only means of identification, were added by the killer later, there was a good chance the identification was false. And if the body wasn't yours it was most likely the missing Casper Stone."

"But why did he risk showing up at the bus station tonight?" Connie wanted to know.

Leopold looked at Rich Easton. "For the same reason he faxed that message to Stone's lawyer rather than phone him. He must have known Griswald would respect lawyer-client privileges and

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not immediately report the call to the police. But he couldn't phone Griswald because he couldn't fake Casper Stone's voice well enough to fool the lawyer. The whole business with the message and the bus station was simply to strengthen the idea that Casper Stone was alive and on the run. I assume he went to the bus station with the blue suit over the pants and shirt he's wearing now. He'd added gray to his hair, and without the teeth he looked like a different person. Leaving the suit in the men's room where it was sure to be found and identified, he figured we'd go after the bus and the trail would come to a dead end. Meanwhile he'd slip out of town some other way and link up with that missing money. It might have worked, but when I noticed that toothless man I remembered the perfect set of false teeth. I remembered the man who sent that fax while hardly opening his mouth. And then the whole thing came to me."

Easton's attorney moistened his lips. "We'll plead self-defense. You've got no case."

"That's for a jury to decide."

Later, back in the squad room, Connie said, "It's after one. You'd better go home, Captain. Molly will be wondering what happened."

"What happened was that a couple of tries at a new life didn't work out. Casper Stone is dead and Rich Easton is in a cell."

He went out to the car, thinking that his own new life was about the same as the old one had been. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 172

"We heard your broadcast," Buck Potter said. "So we knew you had to be someplace else. You shouldn't have left the weather report on that old tape, Tommy. Don't think we're expecting five inches of snow in June."

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BY CLARK HOWARD

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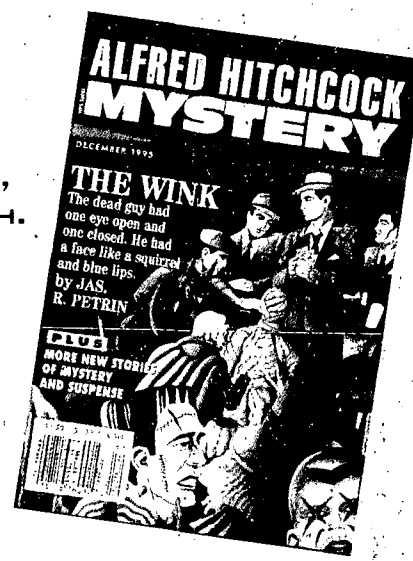
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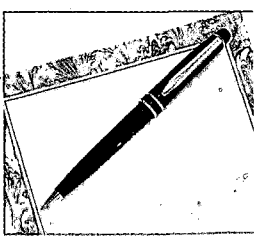

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